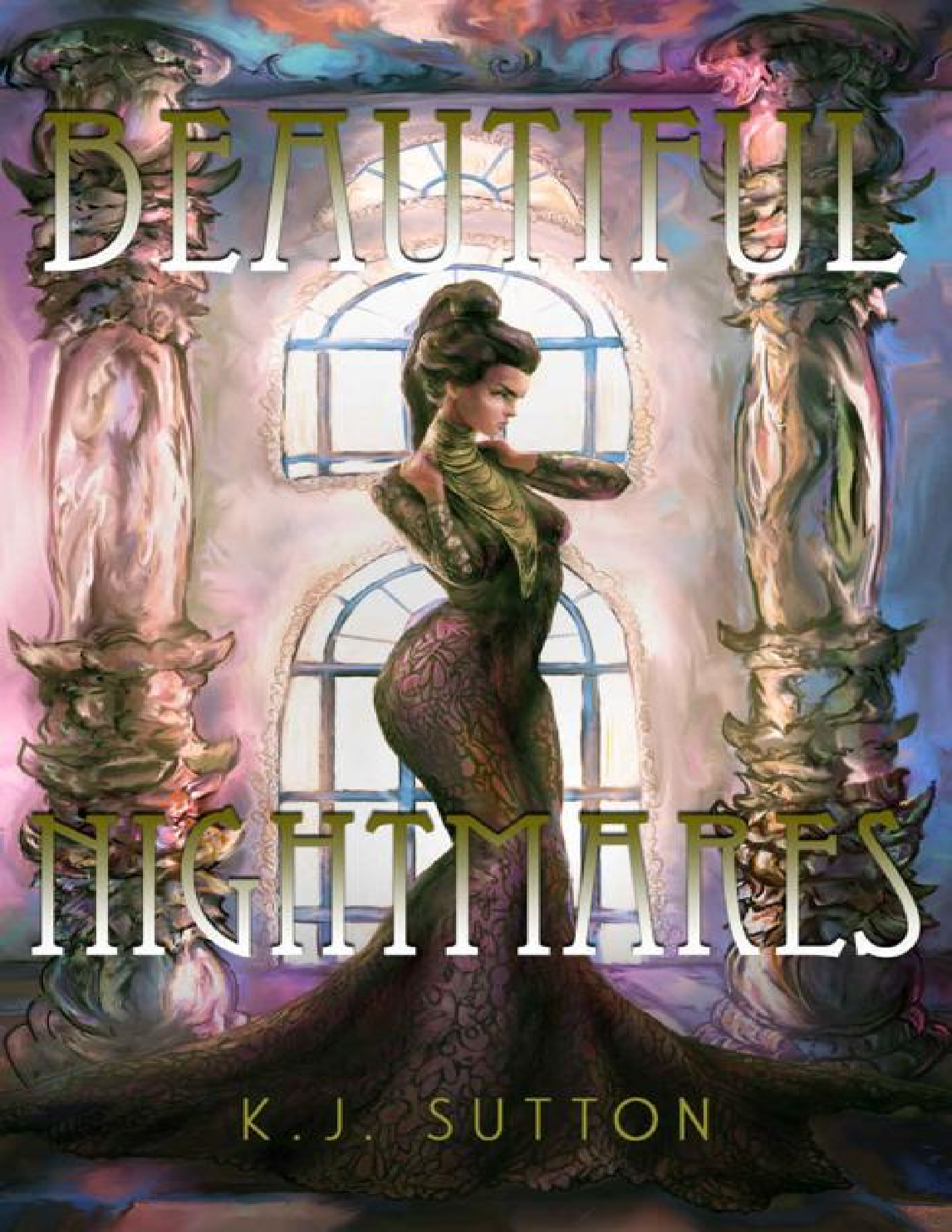
BEAUTIFUL
NIGHTMARES
K. J. SUTTON

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BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARES

K. J. SUTTON

ONCE UPON A TIME
books

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ISBN 978-1-7334616-4-1 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-7334616-9-6 (e-book)

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Front cover image by Gwenn Danae

Typography by Book Covers by Seventhstar

Published in the United States of America

ALSO BY K.J. SUTTON

The *Fortuna Sworn* Saga

Fortuna Sworn
Restless Slumber
Deadly Dreams
Beautiful Nightmares

Standalones

Straight On 'Til Morning

Novellas

Summer in the Elevator

CONTENT WARNING

Please be aware this novel contains scenes or themes of profanity, sexual harassment, branding, torture, hallucinations, death, sex, alcoholism, violence, gore, transphobia, murder, and demons.

If I got rid of my demons, I’d lose my angels.

—Tennessee Williams

PREFACE

A familiar voice drifted through the air. “Are you going to leave me down here forever, Fortuna Sworn?”

For a moment or two, I genuinely believed I was going to vomit. The world tilted, and I moved to grab hold of something and wait until this dream passed. Because it had to be a dream, another terrible nightmare pouncing on me within the night. Maybe I was still at the Seelie Court, and these past few days had been another mind game. God, suddenly I hoped that was actually true.

The faerie at my side watched me regain control, his expression unreadable. When he spoke again, his voice was uncharacteristically solemn. “Are you ready for this?”

Neither of us would like my response, so I said nothing. I turned around, touching the gun at my hip to make sure it was still there. But I didn’t move. Not yet—I had to wipe all expression from my face first. Had to hide the fear and pain, so the person waiting below didn’t see it. Then I looked down and willed myself to move.

Never had I stared so intently at a doorknob. It gleamed dully in the lamplight, dented and faded from so many years of use. Desperate for any kind of delay or distraction, I allowed myself to wonder about all the people that had touched this doorknob before. What sort of lives they’d led. Whether they’d ever found themselves in a moment like this.

The air trembled with an enraged scream. I almost recoiled, but somehow I stayed in place, gathering the last of my resolve. My hand returned to the gun at my hip, partly in reassurance, and partly in some desperate hope that it wouldn’t be there.

With one more deep, fortifying breath, I finally opened the door and went to kill someone I loved.

CHAPTER ONE

Light filtered through my eyelids, turning them pink.

I was reluctant to open them, because I could already feel the headache waiting for me on the other side of consciousness. Instead, I clung to the darkness as if it were an old friend. There were no dreams in the darkness, no painful memories, no landscapes shrouded in mystery and sorrow. There was only quiet.

But I was awake now. It was nearly impossible to sink back into slumber once awareness had gotten its claws into me. Inch by inch, it pulled me toward that light. I fought it—something told me there was more than a headache coming—and knew I'd already lost.

Slowly, I cracked my eyes open.

I peered at reality through my eyelashes. When light didn't rush in, and the pain didn't immediately set upon me, I opened them completely. A frown pulled at my lips as I looked around. Comprehension was slow, but it did come. Bed. Dresser. Blankets. Walls. Pale early sunlight filtered through gauzy white curtains. I didn't recognize where I was. Did I get blackout drunk last night? Was this part of the dreamscape?

I'd barely finished the thought when memories started returning. I almost wished they would stay gone, but the past few days roared into my mind like a hurricane. Images raced past in dizzying disarray. Faces and places and moments. Then, a voice.

I'm going to make you a Nightmare again.

Laurie. Laurie had kidnapped me from Granby, using hideous creatures beneath his command, and spirited me away to the Seelie Court.

I remembered the chains at the exact moment I heard them clink. I tested them again, as if the metal might've weakened while I was unconscious. They held fast, but at least they weren't dipped in holy water—the chains were only irritating, rather than painful.

Now that I was regaining my senses, and my mind wasn't slow with shock and hallucinogens, I saw for the first time that there were bars over the floor-to-ceiling window. My heart beat hard and fast as I cast another glance over the room, taking in the details I'd been too shocked or bleary to notice before. An ivory duvet covered me, smooth against my skin. I wore a white nightgown with long sleeves and a plunging neckline, which was enticingly framed with shiny lace. To the right, a mammoth fireplace took up one wall, unlit, and an enormous painting hung above it. The other walls were covered in wallpaper, and it was strange, not in color, which was green as swampwater, but in the design. There were black lines that didn't look like flowers or some random, symmetrical pattern.

Why was I focusing so hard on the goddamn wallpaper?

Trying to keep panic at bay, I continued my perusal of the space and noted there was only one exit, the pair of double doors Laurie had used yesterday. They were made of dark wood, the edges adorned with elegant carvings. At the same moment I noticed this, I realized I needed to find a bathroom, and *fast*. Or soon I would be laying in my own mess, unable to move or clean myself up.

"Hello?" I called, my voice hoarse. Apparently I needed water, too. "Laurie? Is anyone out there? I'm about five seconds away from peeing on your nice sheets!"

Silence.

Frustration sliced through me now, cutting the fear to ribbons. I shifted again, hoping to relieve some of the pressure on my bladder. I wasn't sure how long I'd been here, exactly—I remembered waking up, discovering Laurie at my side, and him leaving shortly after saying those ominous words. *I'm going to make you a Nightmare again.*

A healer had entered seconds later. She'd been nothing like Zara, a faerie at the Unseelie Court with cool hands and a calm demeanor. This healer, though beautiful, was rough when she worked on me, her dark eyes flashing and her lips twisted into a scowl. Her administrations, along with whatever injection she'd used, had sent me into a dreamless sleep.

Feeling more clear-headed with every second that passed, I took stock of everything else in the room, wondering if there was anything I could use for a weapon. But there was only the bed and the small table that Laurie had used for his tea set. Even the chair he'd been sitting on was gone. If I managed to get free of the chains, I might be able to break off one of the table legs and sharpen the end. Against a faerie, though, it wouldn't do much damage without holy water. It might slow him down, at least. Long enough for me to pick the lock and get out of this room.

Suddenly voices drifted through the door, and it sounded like they were drawing closer. I stiffened, lifting my head to hear better. "…cannot complete the spell until she is a Nightmare. As she is now, the wretch is useless," someone murmured.

In the next moment, the door opened, giving me no chance to mull over the words. *Spell?*

Laurelis Dondarte strolled into the room. He looked resplendent, damn him, in a blue business suit and a red tie. Subtle white pinstripes lined the material and stylish, pointed leather shoes covered his feet. He wore the same crown as before, and it caught the light, casting spots of brilliance in every direction. My mouth was even drier now, and it felt impossible to believe this was the same faerie who'd embraced me in the snow only days earlier.

As Laurie strode toward the bed, an Irish Wolfhound followed close on his heels, and I frowned at the sight of it. Laurie had never mentioned a dog in all the time I'd known him. Its size made me think of Finn, and a pang of longing hit me. I thought of the last time I saw the werewolf—he'd been fighting those things in the hospital. Lyari had been fighting, too. Where were they? Had the cherubim killed them?

Lyari, I thought fiercely. If she was all right, nothing would stop her from answering my summons. I waited a beat, so hopeful that it was an ache in my chest. But Lyari didn't materialize. The only other faerie that might answer my call was Collith, and he was probably rotting in a cell at the Unseelie Court.

Before I could ask about my friends, Laurie's eyes alighted on my face and brightened when he realized I was looking back at him. His silver hair was slicked back in a style I'd never seen him use before. "Oh, good, you're awake," he said. His voice was still strange to my ears. "I was beginning to wonder if Iris had overdosed you. Humans are so fragile."

Humans. The word made my heart quicken again. I was human. I wasn't sure how I kept forgetting, especially since the only reason Laurie wasn't cowering in the corner was because I no longer had my powers.

"I'm still waiting for you to tell me this whole thing is a joke," I said through my teeth, yanking at the chains in a futile attempt to launch myself at him. I kept reaching for my abilities, deep within me, an instinct that ran deeper than any root or feeling. Every time I came up empty, the sensation was jarring. It felt wrong, like a missing limb. Hysteria began to hover at the edges of my mind.

The faerie prince was looking at me like a buyer at the black market. Evaluating me for flaws. Assessing my strength. Whatever he saw there compelled him to turn around and stride back to the doors. His enormous dog had settled in front of the fireplace, despite there being no fire. The animal watched its master without moving. Those round, dark eyes betrayed nothing.

"Fetch Fende, please," Laurie murmured to someone beyond my line of sight.

His arms moved, and when he turned, he was holding the chair from our last conversation. It seemed as though the elaborate seat weighed nothing as he crossed the room again and set it down beside me. Whoever was by the doors closed both without allowing me a glimpse of anything outside the room. While Laurie got settled, my first instinct was to ask who Fende was. But I knew that was exactly what he wanted.

"Where are Finn and Lyari?" I asked instead, my nostrils flaring. "And when am I going to be unchained? Or am I expected to just lay in my own piss?"

Once again, Laurie didn't acknowledge that I'd spoken. He turned his gaze away, and I followed it to the painting over the fireplace. For the first time, I really looked at the image those streaks of oil formed. Against a dark backdrop, a dozen faeries interacted in a tangle of bare skin and varying expressions, some of them sly, others aroused. The scene reminded me of a night at the Unseelie Court.

"It was done by a human," Laurie told me loftily, as if I had asked. "A mortal artist who was obsessed with painting my kind. I don't remember the fellow's name, of course."

I didn't care about the painting, or who had done it. I refocused on Laurie and traced his familiar features with my eyes, wondering again how

I could have been so wrong about someone. His voice drifted through my head like the trail of fingertips over skin. *You are beautiful, Fortuna Sworn.* Thinking of that day in the snow hurt now—it had meant more to me than I wanted to admit.

"You were my friend," I said softly.

Laurie finally pulled his focus away from the painting. His lips curved into a patronizing smile. "And we are still friends. You have been treated well, have you not? My healer has tended to your wounds. You've been given this lovely guest suite. My chef will be preparing the finest meals. No other prisoner within these walls enjoys such privileges."

"Privileges," I echoed, my pulse quickening again, this time with rage. God, I hated faeries. I waited for the stir of magic in my veins, longing for release. When I only felt that stillness again, that yawning emptiness, I almost screamed. From where it still rested on the floor, Laurie's dog shifted. It could probably sense the thickening tension. "I'm chained to a bed, Laurie. Where's the fucking *privilege* in that?"

Distaste flashed in his eyes. "Crass one, aren't you? And here I thought we could be pleasant about all this."

Something about the words made me pause. There was a small voice at the back of my head, trying to communicate something, but I couldn't quite hear it. My bladder was on the verge of bursting and I was too angry, too agitated. "You said you had plans," I said slowly, watching Laurie closely. "Care to elaborate? I heard something about a spell."

Laurie's brows rose, and he smiled again, looking genuinely pleased. "Your hearing is better than I thought it would be. A good sign, perhaps. There may be more Fallen blood in you than Iris believed."

I couldn't stop staring at his mouth now, but there was nothing sexual about the intensity of my focus. I felt my brow furrow as the seconds ticked past. His smile, his tone, his mannerisms… everything about Laurie felt off. Granted, he could have been playing an act the entire time I'd known him. Laurie was fond of his games, a fact he had proven again and again, from the moment we first met and he pretended to be a timid, lowly thing. But that voice inside me was getting louder, practically shrieking now.

He was still waiting for me to respond. At the same moment I started to say something, a feeling took hold of my limbs, like a small venomous

snake slithering under the skin. My mind twisted and flailed like someone falling through the air.

"You're not Laurie," I whispered, utterly certain it was the truth the moment I said it out loud. Why hadn't I seen it sooner? *You're smarter than this, Fortuna.* I knew the loss of my abilities was partially to blame. I was human, which meant I could no longer sense power in the air. This creature had probably been using magic to disguise himself from the moment I first woke up.

To my disappointment, his only reaction was a slight shrug. "If believing that makes your present circumstances more bearable, by all means."

"Then prove it," I challenged, refusing to give up the sliver of hope I'd found. "What did you say to me in Hallerbos, the night we opened Creiddylad's tomb?"

There was another beat of silence. I waited for Laurie to say the words. The words that had been hovering at the back of my head, unacknowledged and unclaimed, like a secret box tucked away in an attic. *When this is all over, remember that it was me. It was me who saved you, and not him.*

The faerie appraised me again, his head tilted in that achingly familiar way. My heart felt like thunder and I knew he could hear it. I didn't even dare to breathe. As discomfort began to prickle in my lungs, I realized how important it was to me that I was right.

Then he said, "I suppose there's little point in keeping up the pretense. I had hoped to use it to our advantage, but no matter."

With that, my captor dropped his glamour.

I recoiled as if I'd been physically assaulted. Time seemed to slow as I took in the details of the new face looking back at me, and the only sound in the room was my own ragged breaths.

This faerie bore significant similarities to the person he'd been impersonating—they had to be related, I thought faintly. The male in front of me had longer lashes, though, and his silvery hair had a thick wave to it, which was probably why he'd slicked it back. But the biggest difference was how the right side of his face was puckered with burn scars, making him look like a half-melted candle.

"I suppose Laurie gave you that?" I managed, thinking of the one on Collith's face. My wily friend certainly liked to leave his mark on people. *My friend.* The thought sent a wave of relief crashing through me, and for

a moment, I was drowning in it. He hadn't lied to me. Betrayed me. The trust we'd built between us was still firmly intact. Well, as intact as trust could be with a person like Laurelis Dondarte.

The imposter let out a delicate laugh. "Goodness, no, nothing so dramatic as that. When we were children, Laurelis and I had an inattentive nanny. She wasn't there to save me when I fell into a fireplace, and the damage went so deep that I wasn't able to fully repair it. The healers could only ease my pain and quicken the scarring process. My mother has always called it 'a touch of divinity.'"

It was never a good sign when the bad guy made a reference to his mommy right off the bat.

Knowing I couldn't afford to be slow anymore, I recovered quickly from my shock. The chains rattled with every movement as I eased away from the headboard and looked at the faerie with a cool expression—my time as the Unseelie Queen hadn't been a total waste of time, at least. I was better at playing their game now.

The thought made another memory pop into my head. *Sometimes it's not about being stronger. It's about being smarter.*

I shied away from thinking of Oliver, but his advice was just as applicable now as it had been then. Without the strength of a Nightmare, I really would need to be smarter if I planned on saving myself.

"Who are you?" I asked despite the unlikelihood of getting an answer. I had a dozen more questions after this one, which meant my bladder would have to wait.

This faerie was full of surprises, because he didn't hesitate to say, "You may call me Belanor. As I'm sure you've guessed, Laurelis is my older brother. Well, older by an hour, but that hour was all it took for him to claim the throne."

You have got to be kidding me. In that instant, I wanted nothing more than to throttle Laurie. It might have been helpful to know he literally had an evil twin. "I wasn't aware he had any siblings," was all I said.

Belanor smirked. It was so similar to Laurie's that I blinked. "It seems you were not very close friends, if Laurelis didn't bother telling you about us," he remarked. "Our parents had three children between them. Five, if you count the ones that died."

To be fair, I'd never asked Laurie about his family or his past. The realization sent a pang of shame through my painfully mortal body. He

knew my darkest secrets. He'd sacrificed what he valued most so I wouldn't have to. He had comforted me in my darkest moments. And yet, in spite of everything Laurie had done for me, I'd never bothered to learn a single thing about him. If I ever escaped this place, I would remedy that.

One thing at a time, I reminded myself. "What is this place? Where are we?" I asked next.

A knock interrupted us. The sound was slow and booming, as if whoever struck the wood didn't know their own strength. I half-expected a long crack to form.

"Enter," Belanor called. The dog had lifted its head again, its ears perked. The door opened, and an enormous male stepped over the threshold. He wore thick, medieval-looking armor, complete with a helmet that thoroughly hid his face. The dog laid back down, clearly familiar with this formidable-looking guard. Belanor's tone was brisk as he said, "Ah, Fende. Excellent. You may begin."

I stiffened, but the new faerie didn't come toward us. Instead, he turned and strode to the fireplace. He was so heavy that his footsteps echoed in the near-empty room. I couldn't take my eyes off him. Or, more accurately, the sheer *size* of him—Fende was even bigger than Death Bringer, the resident torturer at the Unseelie Court.

I was so preoccupied that I almost missed the things he carried in his gauntlet-covered hands. Was that a poker? There was something at the end of it, but Fende turned his back before I could get a better look.

Suddenly there was movement in the corner of my eye. Still wearing a bland expression, and trying to keep my heart rate steady, I turned my head. A smaller figure had entered behind Fende. She carried a silver tray in her small hands and kept her gaze downcast. Though she appeared healthy, with a clean sheen to her brown hair and curves beneath her well-made clothes, I looked at her and thought, *Slave*. It was in how she moved, somehow, and the way she wouldn't lift her eyes. Belanor furthered this theory when he didn't acknowledge her.

Now that I was human, it struck me that I had fewer ways of knowing whether someone was Fallen or not. The woman appeared mortal, due to her rounded ears and the lines beneath her eyes, but she could very well be a witch or some other species that aged. I kept staring at her, as if I'd regain the ability to detect power the harder I looked for it. Once again, I experienced that painful sensation of something missing.

Without a single glance in my direction, the woman set the tea service down and backed away, her small hands clasped against the front of her wool skirt. She walked backward until she reached the doorway, and then she was gone, leaving me frustrated and shaken. I hadn't realized how much I relied on my Nightmare side all these years. Dad would've had a lot to say about that, since he had taught me how to defend myself in nearly every situation.

Bet you couldn't have predicted this one, Dad. The thought made my heart hurt, and I quickly refocused.

As the armored giant began building a fire, Belanor went about making himself a cup of tea. Moving as if his bones were made of liquid, he poured hot water into his cup. Stream rose into the air. The curve of his wrist was so pronounced. Breakable. I hadn't given much thought to Laurie's age, but watching his brother, I suspected they came from a time of refinement and propriety.

"Physically, we are in Germany," Belanor said abruptly, answering my question at last. "More specifically, the Nymphenburg Palace. It once belonged to a king—his summer home, I believe. Now, in the human world, tourists roam the halls. The Seelie Court does not exist in a separate dimension, as the Unseelie Court does, but a powerful spell protects the grounds."

I was having trouble listening; my attention kept going to Fende. I couldn't see the specifics of what he was doing, but I could hear small sounds. The dull thud of wood. A click. The creak of his heavy armor. My survival instincts were even louder as a human, and they hissed like a nest of rattlesnakes. *Danger, danger*. But the chains around my wrists held fast and I couldn't use fear as a defense anymore. I needed to get more out of Belanor, because right now, information was the only weapon at my disposal.

"You said that you plan on making me a Nightmare again. Even if that were possible, why is it so important?" I asked, forcing myself to concentrate.

The faerie prince had finished preparing his tea. He sat within a slant of daylight, legs crossed, holding the delicate handle of a cup between thumb and forefinger. In that moment, with those puckered scars and his sharp-edged suit, Belanor Dondarte looked like a living painting.

The thought filled my head with memories of Oliver.

It used to be one of our favorite rituals—I'd see something in the real world, a moment so striking that I could describe it in vivid detail even after falling asleep. Oliver would produce a new canvas and place it onto his easel, which appeared wherever we were. Inside the cottage, at the cliff's edge, beneath our oak tree. His expression became distant as he listened to the cadence of my voice. Each time, without fail, I got lost in his beauty while he was lost to the brush strokes. The colors. The glimpse of a world he could never experience for himself.

I'd never watch my best friend paint again.

It felt like something had viciously jabbed my heart, and I started to put my hand over it, remembering belatedly that I was still chained to a bed. Belanor watched the play of emotions across my face with an air of mild interest, and I struggled to shove Oliver back in the shadows. Flames crackled into the stillness.

Having succeeded in his task, Fende bent to retrieve the poker, and every thought about Oliver vanished. The giant moved in a way that made it obvious he was using the poker to shift a log. I waited to see the flare of embers, but nothing happened. I hid a frown. The rattlesnakes in my head got louder.

"Do you love him? The dragon that ruined you?" Belanor asked abruptly.

He spoke in the same composed, silken voice he always used, but my attention snapped back to him and stayed there. The words replayed in my head. *The dragon that ruined you,* Belanor had said—he could only mean Cyrus. Was this faerie so obsessed with his bizarre mission that he was thinking of eliminating anyone who'd endangered it?

As Belanor waited for my response, I gathered every moment I'd spent as the Unseelie Queen around me. Dad's voice floated through the quiet, stern but encouraging, giving instruction for the thousandth time on how to achieve calm and control. I knew my friend's life might depend on how well I handled these next few moments.

"Cyrus Lavender?" I clarified with raised brows, willing my insides to stop shaking. *Calm. You feel calm. No, you are numb. You are nothing.* "Not hardly. He's just my landlord."

The lie had barely passed my mouth when Belanor froze; even the slight rise and fall of his chest ceased. His eyes went glassy and vacant. He was still holding the cup of tea, but his grip looked lax now. I stared at

him, baffled, then darted a glance at Fende to see what he thought of his master's strange behavior. The other male either didn't notice or this was a regular occurrence for him—he didn't turn away from his task. The dog hadn't even opened its eyes.

"Yes," Belanor said. It was obvious he wasn't talking to either of us. "I understand."

Every inch of my body felt like it had turned to ice. "You're insane," I observed.

The faerie's gaze cleared and he returned the full force of his attention to me. My pulse was racing again, and I watched Belanor's nostrils flare, taking note of this. In spite of the efforts I'd made to hide any trace of fear, he could smell it. Hear it.

I had faced predators before, but never as such weak prey. Though I was lying utterly still, Belanor's features sharpened as his other instincts overtook him. His eyes, so similar to Laurie's, brightened like he was a nocturnal animal caught in the sweep of headlights. Even his teeth looked sharper. In that instant, there was absolutely nothing about this creature that seemed human.

I'd gotten used to fae courtiers and their careful masks of civility—looking at Belanor was a stark reminder of what I had allowed myself to forget.

"Mortal you may be, but I admit the dragonfire did nothing to dim your beauty," he murmured, slowly setting his tea onto the table.

The chains clinked as I shifted, this time in a desperate bid to put some distance between us. I hadn't even considered that Belanor could see my real face, and the fact sent an oily sensation over my skin. The irony wasn't lost on me—once, this was all I wanted. For people to perceive the person beneath, rather than the perfect illusion. Now it just made me feel exposed and vulnerable. I had never been so helpless, and if Belanor chose to take what he wanted instead of waiting for permission, there was nothing I could do to stop him.

"Before you say anything else, just know that I would literally rather die than have any kind of sexual encounter with you," I informed the faerie prince, instinctively resorting to sarcasm. At least my voice didn't bely the terror roaring through me.

Shutters slammed over Belanor's expression. In an instant, I knew that I'd struck him where he was weakest—his vanity.

“Then I have some good news, my dear.” Leaning back, Belanor tugged at his cuff links. His manner was once again crisp and polite as he continued, “You may very well not survive what’s about to come next. It’s why I provided healing and sustenance for your mortal body—I had hoped to make you strong enough. If you’re the praying sort, I suggest you start now. Are you ready, Fende?”

The bulky figure in front of the fire finally turned toward us. He nodded once, slow and deliberate. The dog got to its feet and padded to the door, letting out a low whine. Neither of the faeries acknowledged it. Though I couldn’t see Fende’s eyes because of my angle and his height, I could imagine them, dark and unblinking. He moved again, fully facing the bed now, and a glow drew my focus downward.

Not a poker, I thought over the dull roaring in my ears. It was a branding iron.

Just like that, I knew what was about to happen. My heart rammed against its confines as I strained to see what these faeries planned to brand on me. There was a symbol burning bright at the end of that metal rod. I’d never encountered it before, but it bore similarities to letters in the Enochian alphabet. Panicked questions rose inside me, along with the acidic burn of vomit, but I gritted my teeth to keep it all down. Belanor had already explained his motives—he wanted a Nightmare. A member of my species was probably an ingredient he needed for the spell, and considering we weren’t exactly easy to come by, it was no wonder he was determined to undo the results of Cyrus’s dragonfire.

Apparently he intended to do that with pain.

I yanked at the chains again, knowing it was futile. I tried summoning the faeries that would’ve come already, if something weren’t keeping them away. Or keeping me hidden. *Lyari. Laurie. Where are you? Please come. Please.*

Neither of them appeared. Someone else would save me, I thought desperately as I watched Fende cross the room, drawing nearer with every mail-clanging step. This didn’t happen in the fairy tales or stories. A knight always crashed through the door or there was a random streak of life-saving luck.

But my life was no fairy tale.

Collith, I thought just as Fende reached for my shoulder. I instantly wrenched to the side, trying to break free. Without a moment of hesitation,

the guard shoved me against the mattress with one of his giant hands, pinning me like a bug to a board, and lifted his other arm. I screamed and swore at him. Against his strength, I was as helpless as the kitten Laurie had given me.

The branding iron touched my shoulder in a burst of red light and sizzling heat.

I heard the sound of burning flesh first. Then, half a breath later, the pain hit. It was an agony comparable to Cyrus's dragonfire, and I felt my bladder finally give way. Urine soaked the bed. The world had gone white and there was nothing else except the flames. I screamed until my throat was hoarse and the dog clawed at the door frantically.

All the while, Belanor smiled.

In reality, the branding only lasted a few seconds. But it felt like hours.

By the time Fende pulled away, removing the source of that searing pain, black spots filled my vision. I lay like a glassy-eyed doll on the sheets, which were now drenched with sweat and piss. My breathing was hard and ragged, and I had the same feeling that usually came after a battle or an adrenaline surge—a heavy-lidded detachment to everything around me.

After a few seconds, I was dimly aware of the chains rattling, then arms slid beneath my legs and along my back. Before I could even consider struggling, I was being placed on the floor. Even this brief jostling hurt, and I couldn't hold back a moan. Voices moved over my head as I huddled there, every part of me trembling, my teeth chattering. *Shock*, I thought. *You're in shock.*

There was the sound of soft footsteps. More seconds ticked by, and each one felt like a missed opportunity, because I knew those double doors were probably open behind me. A frustrated scream bounced off the walls of my skull. At that same moment, I caught a glimpse of a sheet trailing past. The flash of a skirt. They were changing the bedding, I realized, since I'd lost control of my bladder. Had Belanor given the order? Was he still here? Maybe the branding wasn't over. I couldn't remember hearing Fende leave. In a burst of terror, I tried to lift my head, but nothing happened.

“Jesus, it smells in here,” someone snapped. “Humans are so vile.”

Despite the terror roaring in my ears, I knew an insult when I heard one. I longed to respond with an insult—normally I’d have several of them ready—but the pain was still too overwhelming.

“Now, now, Iris. Treat her well, or I will be displeased.”

“We wouldn’t want that,”

The newcomer’s heels made the floor shake as she approached. An instant later, I felt hands shove me with unnecessary force, and I rolled onto my stomach with another moan I couldn’t contain.

Silence swelled around us, save for the creak of leather and the clink of glass. *Probably a medical bag*, I thought. Zara carried one, and I’d heard those same sounds the last time she tended to me. So Belanor had summoned a healer. *Iris*, he’d called her.

I hissed through my teeth when she dabbed at the brand with a washcloth. Soon a new smell laced through the stench of burned flesh, notes that made me think of hospitals and medicine cabinets. Belanor’s healer must’ve expended too much energy recently, or she wouldn’t be resorting to human means of treatment. It meant that I would be in agony for the unforeseeable future, considering mortals took weeks to recover from injuries like this.

Trying not to whimper at the thought, I listened to Iris rummage through her bag again. I wasn’t prepared when her hands returned, this time with a bandage, and I cried out as it made contact with the fresh burn. The sound only seemed to make her rougher. Determined not to give the healer any more satisfaction, I bit my lip so hard I tasted blood. When she pulled away, I was so relieved that some of the tension visibly left my body, in spite of the pain still radiating from the newly-covered brand.

The pressure of Iris’s hands had only disappeared for a moment when I felt a prick in my neck, there and gone like a scorpion’s strike. *A pain reliever?* I wondered hopefully.

She offered no explanation, of course. Without a word, Iris retrieved her bag and her warm presence retreated. But instead of going to the doors, she circled me, walking so close that I felt the vibrations of her footsteps through my bones.

I saw the hem of her dress first, then Iris knelt so that I could see her face. *Witch*, I thought with faint surprise. From the strength of her shove, I’d expected the healer to be a faerie. Brown eyes flicked between mine,

and a smile hovered around her lips. One of her hands dangled elegantly off her knee. Her nails gleamed red in the pale light pouring through the windows. Judging from the faint lines around her mouth and across her forehead, she was probably very, very old. If we were in the human world, any passerby would assume she was in her late twenties or early thirties.

"They spoke of you with such awe," she said, keeping her voice pitched low. My gaze rose back to hers, and the witch's lovely features twisted into a sneer. "The Nightmare Queen. They said your beauty was indescribable. They sang of your feats. The one who killed the Leviathan. The one who made even the ancients bow and tremble. But you're not so impressive after all, are you?"

Iris straightened before I could attempt a response. I listened to her walk away, wishing I was able to leap up and *show* her how impressive I was. Or how impressive I used to be.

As if she could hear the thought, Iris's footsteps halted. I imagined her turning in the doorway, giving me one last look. I'd never felt so small. So pathetic.

"I look forward to watching you break," the witch said.

And I look forward to making you rip your own face off, I tried to snarl back. Just as I opened my mouth, though, it felt like something sank its claws into me and dragged my mind into shadow. Iris must've given me a sedative. I fought it, every instinct I had shrieking against being vulnerable and unconscious when I was surrounded by the enemy.

The darkness won.

CHAPTER TWO

The next time I awoke, I was back on the bed.

Moonlight spilled through the windows. Chains were once again secured around my wrists and ankles. For an instant, I felt a wild sense of relief, thinking the branding had been a nightmare, just a terrible nightmare that Oliver was no longer there to shield me from. Then the pain rushed in, as if it were eager to crush my spirit. It was like Cyrus's dragonfire on a lesser scale, a white-hot agony simmering beneath the burnt skin.

Seeing that I was alone, I allowed myself to let out a faint sound, something halfway between a whimper and a sob.

With slow, ginger movements, I rolled onto my side. It put one of my arms in an awkward angle, but anything was better than laying on the brand.

Now that I was facing the other way, I noticed a tray on Belanor's tea table, which had been brought closer to the bed. A beat later, the delicious scents rolling off it reached me, and my mouth instantly began to water. Despite what Belanor had done, he hadn't lied about one thing—he was feeding me well. In addition to a plate of tender-looking steak and mashed potatoes, there was a glass of red wine. Condensation rolled down the glass and steam rose from the food.

I realized the last time I'd eaten had been at home, well before the cherubim took me. How long ago had that been? A day? Two? I tested the chains—the wound under Iris's bandage protested, making me hiss through my teeth—and someone must've made adjustments while I was

out, because I had more range of motion. Probably just enough to reach for that tray and eat.

I faced the same dilemma I had when I first arrived at the Unseelie Court; it was widely-known that faeries liked to put things in food and drinks. Spells, poisons, drugs. Belanor wanted me strong, though. He wouldn't put his precious Nightmare-to-be at risk. Right? He may have had me branded, but he'd also sent Iris in afterward.

My mind kept working and turning like a Rubik's Cube. If I didn't eat, I'd only get weaker. Belanor might be trying to get me at full health for his undoubtedly nefarious purposes, but I needed to be if I was going to escape.

And escape was the only way I would survive this. It had become clear that I couldn't wait for someone else to be the hero. Not this time. Even if my family was looking, it might be too late by the time they got here. Something told me getting branded was just the start of my delightful experience at the Seelie Court, and I wasn't interested in sticking around to find out if I was right.

As I ate, barely tasting the seasoned potatoes past the adrenaline coating my mouth, I scanned the room yet again. There had to be something I'd missed. Something I wasn't seeing. Adam was always stressing how anything could be made into a tool or weapon. But all I saw was the smooth floors and papered walls. The only furniture was the bed and the table, which were hardly useful for—

The bedsprings. I could use the bedsprings to pick the padlock.

But that meant chewing through the bedsheets and the mattress beneath. It was going to take time, and it wouldn't be fun. I wavered, glancing around the room again, as if another solution would jump out at me. Everything was still. Not even a single sound from whatever was beyond that door. Swallowing a sigh, I hurried to finish the swiftly-cooling food. A few minutes later, I set the plate aside, slid down, and got to work.

It was easier to do in theory. The sheets were more high quality than I'd anticipated, and just a few minutes into my task, the skin around my mouth felt raw. Every time I faltered, I pictured Fende coming toward me again, that bright branding iron in his enormous fist.

I had no way of keeping track of time, but it couldn't have been more than a half hour later when the room went fuzzy around the edges. I knew in an instant this was more than exhaustion or hunger.

The food, I thought distantly. There had been something in the food. I flopped onto my back, the chains rattling, and barely noticed the twinge of pain. *You're a fool, Fortuna Sworn.*

I told myself to fight through it, keep going, but there was no fighting whatever surged through my veins. I watched the ceiling break into fragments, no, crystals, and for a few seconds, or hours, the entire room glittered. As the brilliance faded, my gaze fell onto that wallpaper again. *It looks so strange,* I thought, extending a finger toward that spindly design as if I could touch it.

I finally realized that I was looking at spiders. It was the shadows that made it obvious, the way the moonlight slanted over the beady eyes and tangling legs, highlighting the truth of the images.

A sound came from far away, and the instant my mind registered what I'd heard, it felt like someone had tossed a rope just as I was being swept out to sea—that had been Laurie's voice. He was calling to me, pulling me back. Somehow, he'd figured out where I was. From the beginning, it had been Laurie who came through when I needed someone most.

Hope was a drug all its own. Feeling more clear-headed, I turned my head on the pillow. When I saw who really sat in the chair beside me, though, all of that iridescence faded to nothing, a star winking out in the sky.

It was Belanor I'd heard, not Laurie. He sat in his usual pose, with his legs crossed and one wrist draped over the armrest. For once, the prince wasn't drinking tea. Instead, he turned a wine glass by its stem, the thin piece of glass held between his tapered fingers. Someone had brought in a lamp, and it glowed beside him. Save for the moonbeams coming through the windows, it was the only other light in the room.

"I have a theory, Miss Sworn. Would you care to hear it?" Belanor asked by way of greeting.

My first instinct was to snarl the vilest insult I could think of… but I wanted answers more. I knew that, despite the way I kept losing focus and the walls quivered like I was underwater. Had I consumed a sedative of some kind? No, I would've succumbed to it already. But it was definitely a mind-altering drug. Edges were blurred and every sound too loud. The air going in and out of my lungs, the chains, the soft huffs of the dog in the corner.

Suddenly I remembered that Belanor had asked me a question. It took me another moment to remember what it was. *I have a theory, Miss Sworn. Would you care to hear it?*

"Love to," I slurred.

Pausing dramatically, Belanor took a delicate sip from his wine glass. "I don't believe your abilities are truly gone."

He waited for my reaction. I stared at him, struggling to keep hold of what he'd said. The words slithered in and out of my mind. I was distracted by the burnt side of Belanor's face and how it shone in the lamplight. His bright hair was slicked back again, though the gel was losing its hold and those slight waves were more pronounced. When I managed to tear my eyes away and meet the faerie's gaze, I saw that he was smiling.

"What did you…" I faltered as my gums started to tingle. "What did you do to me?"

"Once again, you're asking the wrong questions, Fortuna Sworn. It's not a matter of what I did to you, but rather what I gave you."

My body felt strange, like I was going to be sick while I was high. My hands were heavy, too. Why were my hands so heavy? I buried them into the bedclothes and clutched the silken material in a white-knuckled grip, hoping that would anchor me. "Fine, what did you *give* me?" I snapped.

He raised his glass in a salute. "Liberation, Lady Sworn. I gave you liberation."

"Why… why are you doing this?"

Belanor swallowed the sip he'd taken. Impatience flashed in his eyes. "I already told you. I'm going to fix you, by whatever means necessary. If that means breaking your mind a little, so be it."

This last part reminded me of Iris's parting comment. *I look forward to watching you break.*

A face loomed in my memory. Daratrine, a faerie at the Unseelie Court. *You're only a victim if you let them break you,* I had told her.

Talk. That's all it was. During my time with Belanor, I'd already been branded and drugged. I was also infinitely more fragile than I used to be, both mentally and physically. As much as I loathed her, Iris was right—I wasn't the queen she'd heard about. Not even close.

Belanor wasn't saying anything, but suddenly it felt like if I didn't get off this bed, find a way out of these chains, I would explode. Literally

explode, my blood and skin splattering the walls and ceiling. I started yanking at them with all the strength left in me, not even flinching when pain shot through my wrists. I kicked my legs, too, making sounds that were more animal than human. With every movement, the brand cried out with me.

Leaning over me with preternatural speed, Belanor shoved a key into one of the steel cuffs around my wrists. Once that one popped open, he did the same to the other. I wasted no time dragging myself to the floor and away from him, but more questions burned in my drug-addled brain. What was he doing? Why was he freeing me?

When Belanor resettled in his chair, realization tasted like ash in my mouth. I was such a minuscule threat that he wasn't even worried that I would hurt him.

I tried to melt into the wall, cringing when my gaze fell on those spiders. My thumb brushed one of the eyes, and I imagined the paper creature's leg twitching. I jerked my hand away. "What do you see?" Belanor asked. His tone was mildly curious.

Sounds drifted from beyond the door. I moaned, giving my nausea a voice, but Belanor misinterpreted it as a question.

"They're making preparations for my coronation. It will be held in a weeks' time, and every faerie of the Seelie Court will be in attendance. I want it to be the biggest event of the decade. Would you like to know what my first act as king will be?" Belanor gave me another smile, this one smaller but more vicious, somehow. His face had taken on that sharper, nonhuman look again. "Extermination. I will lead my warriors down into that hovel the Unseelie scum are so proud of, and I will leave it as a pile of ash."

Coronation? I felt my eyebrows knit together. Belanor was going to be the next Seelie King?

Then that final word sunk in. Extermination. His meaning was all-too clear, even with my mind as slow as it was. Against my will, I pictured them dead—the faeries at the Unseelie Court who had managed to change how I felt about their kind. Lyari. Nym. Omar. Paynore. Even Viessa, who terrified me, but I secretly admired all the same. The image of their bloodless, unmoving faces only made the nausea worse.

Someone had to warn them. I flattened my palm against the cold floor, a line of drool escaping down my chin. I knew it was illogical, the feeling

that if I could just stand, I'd be able to escape this place. Find everyone I cared about and get them as far away from Belanor as possible.

"Fortuna," someone said. It was a woman, her voice vaguely familiar.

I started to look up but in the next moment, it felt like gravity ceased to exist. The floor dropped away, revealing outer space on the other side. Stars glittered all around. Not real. None of this was real. I squeezed my eyes shut and hugged my knees.

"Fortuna Sworn, I summon you."

This time, the woman's voice reached me through the darkness. There was a sternness in that tone, an expectation I instinctively worked to meet, the habit ingrained in me long ago by Matthew Sworn.

When I wrenched my eyes open, I wasn't at the Seelie Court anymore.

I was still curled onto my side, shielding my head as if something had been attacking me from every direction. I tried to see the details of my new surroundings without moving, peering through the space between my arms. The room was warm and modern. Wooden floors, rugs, pictures on the walls, faded furniture. Like the woman's voice, I had a sense of recognition. A strange mist hovered over the floor, though, and I knew this didn't belong.

Within seconds, I discovered that I wasn't alone. Six figures sat around a table to my right. My heart lurched in terror and I stared in wide-eyed dread. *These aren't enemies,* something inside me insisted. After a few seconds, their names rushed into my head like old friends. Lyari, Damon, Emma, Cyrus, Laurie. And Mercy, I noted with faint surprise.

What was Mercy Wardwell doing here?

None of them seemed to be aware of me. I scanned the room again, unable to shake the sense that people were missing. *Finn. Collith.* Their faces came back to me a breath after their names. A male with dark skin and sadly-tilted eyes. The other male had a long scar and an aura of pain around him, as well. Even in the throes of the high, thinking of him hurt.

Laurie said something, and I refocused on him. I'd heard that tone dozens of times—it was the one he always used to antagonize someone.

"Quiet, faerie," Mercy said, her voice rough and sharp, like a serrated knife. There was a deep line of concentration between her brows, and her eyes were closed. The mist rushed and swirled, drawing my attention back to the table, and this time I noticed the bowl. It rested in the center of the

circle they'd formed. When I saw everyone around that table was holding hands, I realized what this was.

A scrying spell.

Hope returned in a rush, filling my lungs, and it felt like I couldn't breathe. Did that mean this was real?

"I've made a connection, but it's faint. Something is blocking me," Mercy added, tightening her fingers around the hands she held.

Before I could tell her the spell had worked, the drug I'd ingested burrowed even deeper. The walls tilted, as if this were a funhouse. I must've made a sound, because every head in the room swiveled toward me.

"Fortuna?" one of them said, sounding as if they were being strangled.

In an attempt to sit up, I braced my hands against the floor. The sight of blood all over them made me pause. It was crusted and dry.

Laurie had crossed the room in swift, long-legged strides. I raised my gaze, and I saw his eyes lock onto the rust-colored stains covering my fingertips. As I struggled to stand, my entire body shaking, Laurie's arms shot out to help, but his hands went through me as if I were a ghost.

I nearly let out a sob when I realized what that meant—I wasn't safe. Even if this *was* real, a scrying spell wouldn't save me. I couldn't remember why I was so petrified, but there was a shadowy figure at the back of my mind. A sense that I was running out of time.

I fell back to my knees, barely noticing the pain jolting through my bones. In a heartbeat, Laurie was in front of me.

"Hey there, Firecracker," he said softly, putting his fingertips close to mine. I focused on them, on how elegant his fingers were, tracing the shape of them with my eyes as if they were a map back to sanity. Laurie's voice, which was as smooth and alluring as melted chocolate, moved gently past me. "Can you tell us where you are? Do you know who took you?"

It was important that I answer him. I knew that, not just from the muscle twitching in his jaw, but also the expressions on everyone else's faces. Why couldn't I remember? The circumstances that had brought me here felt like a mischievous child, dancing backward each time I reached for it. The only things I knew for certain were that I was terrified, and I didn't want to be in my body anymore.

“I feel wrong,” I whispered, clutching myself again as I started to rock back and forth. The movement only made the sensations inside me worse. “There are worms under my skin, Laurie.”

Someone swore under their breath. The faerie kneeling at my side let out a sound that could only be described as a snarl, and I flinched. In my peripheral vision I saw Laurie reach out again, as if to comfort me. His fingers curled into fists. I wondered if I imagined the tremor of rage that went through them. But then his fingers relaxed and they dangled casually, Laurie’s arm perched atop his knee.

“Describe where you are, darling,” he urged, his eyes bright as stars. “Give us any information you can.”

“Okay. Okay.” I nodded, clenching my jaw as the funhouse shifted again. No one else spoke. The silence was so prominent that it felt like another presence in the room. After a minute of struggling, I nearly hit the floor in a burst of frustration. I couldn’t. There was nothing there. No facts, no helpful descriptions, just—

My head jerked up, and my eyes were so wide it was painful. For a heart-stopping, blinding moment, it felt like the mist cleared and sunlight shone upon the world. I heard his voice as though he were beside me again. *If you’re the praying sort, I suggest you start now.*

“Belanor,” I breathed. I remembered what he’d done to my back now, and bile surged up my throat. I couldn’t bring myself to reach behind me and feel the raw edges of the brand, though they throbbed with every breath.

When his brother’s name passed my lips, Laurie’s teeth bared. In that instant, he looked truly feral. “I’m coming for you, Fortuna. I give you my solemn vow,” he said with seething vehemence.

You’re not capable of being solemn, I tried to say. But now I wasn’t sure that was true anymore.

Mercy suddenly let out a low curse. Without warning, the witch pitched forward into the ingredient bowl. Lyari moved in a blur and caught hold of her shoulders. “Is she—” I started.

But the mist closed in and everything went dark again.

CHAPTER THREE

Dreams and hallucinations tore at me like wolves on a hunt. Throughout the night, I'd come back myself in sporadic bursts, panting as though I truly had been running through a dark forest. Then the past nipped at my heels and sent me off again. I heard Belanor's voice wherever I went. Asking questions. Giving orders. Taunting. I had no way of knowing if that was just part of the hallucinations or if he was actually in the room with me, sitting in that goddamn chair and drinking another cup of tea. Tea that I would lace with cyanide instead of honey, if I ever got the chance.

Mercifully, the drug's effects didn't last forever, as part of me started to fear they would. There came a point when I opened my eyes, and I felt slightly better. My body ached like I'd been in a fight, but the dizziness was gone. There were no twitching spider legs on the walls. The terrible things I'd done were tucked away into memories, rather than all around me.

As my vision cleared, I expected to see the walls of my gilded prison and those tall windows lit with morning light. But… I wasn't in the Nymphenburg Palace.

This was home.

I was in the loft that Collith had built for us. The air smelled of fresh paint and recently-cut wood. The lacy nightgown I'd been wearing was gone, replaced by plaid pajama pants and a university T-shirt. *My* clothes. And instead of that canopied monstrosity I'd been chained to, I now rested in the bed I'd barely gotten to share with Collith before everything went to hell.

“No,” I whispered, gripping the sheets with balled fists. I knew Belanor would hear the despair in my voice, but that didn’t matter anymore—I only cared that I was still seeing things and the drug hadn’t finished its dark work yet. How much longer could I bear this? Maybe the drug *had* finished its course, and my mind was broken. I was probably still in that pretty suite, slumped against the wall and drooling.

Might as well see my family, since I’m hallucinating them, that quiet inner voice pointed out.

Resignation crept through my heart. I let out a shuddering breath and cast another glance through the room Collith had designed. The door to my left was cracked open, and a blue glow slanted across the floor. No sounds came with it, though. Was everyone asleep?

I threw aside the covers and stood, barely registering the cold. On bare feet I tiptoed toward that open door. I paused in the doorway, scanning the apartment with an ache inside me that had nothing to do with the brand. My gaze latched onto a small, familiar figure sitting in the living room, her hair aglow from the light of the television.

“Emma?” I said. My voice emerged softly, hesitantly, as though I were a child again.

I was afraid she’d be startled, but the old woman just turned her head. She’d dyed her hair pink. Bright, cotton-candy pink. When she saw me, a welcoming smile spread across her face. She patted the cushion beside her, and the sound was stark in the utter stillness. “I wondered if you’d wake up tonight. Thought I’d stay up for a while, just in case,” she remarked.

Hearing her voice brought tears to my eyes. I blinked to clear them away. Emma waited, but I stayed where I was, knowing I looked as distrustful as I felt. Why did this feel so real? Could it be possible that I was actually here?

No. You’re still stuck in Belanor’s twisted game, Fortuna. In spite of the drugged food I’d eaten, my mind felt clear, and I remembered every moment at the Seelie Court. This, being home, seemed too good to be true. I’d learned that if something seemed too good to be true, it was.

I was about to retreat when my gaze fell onto a magazine on the coffee table. HOW DERMATOLOGISTS WAKE UP WITH YOUNGER-LOOKING SKIN, the headline read. The letters weren’t jumbled or backward.

Collith's voice whispered through my memory. *Did you know that you can't read in a dream?*

"It can't be," I whispered, reading the headline again. And again. Then I lost hold of the reins on my caution, and wild hope galloped free.

Something in my expression prompted Emma to stand and round the couch. Once she was within reach, the old woman gripped my arms gently. I frowned—she knew I avoided physical contact, and after I had told her the truth about what I was, she'd gotten better at checking herself. Did this mean she knew what I'd done? That I was human now?

"Laurie got to the Seelie Court as fast as he could. He and his brother fought," Emma said, looking in my eyes as she spoke. She was the most sober I'd seen her since Fred's funeral.

Part of me was aware that I was still staring. That I should probably say something. But I couldn't speak past the irrational thought that making any sort of sound would send me back to Belanor. For once, I was grateful someone was holding onto me, because it felt like I might collapse. Feeling Emma's warmth also seemed like further confirmation that her words were true, and not just a cruel trick. Her grip was firm.

"Is…" I stopped. Belanor's name felt like bile at the back of my throat. I still worried that if I said it, I'd either summon him or vomit.

Somehow, Emma understood. The way she always understood, even when she didn't have any details. In her own way, Emma Miller was magic, too. Her expression hardened as she answered, "Yes, Belanor is dead."

A sob lodged in my throat and I put a hand over my mouth; I didn't want to wake the others. Emma tugged at me and said something in comforting tones. My thoughts were roaring like a hurricane. *Holy shit. This is real. I'm home and Belanor is dead. It's over*.

Those two words hit me like a hammer exploding through plaster. Hearing them once wasn't enough. I silently repeated them, realizing too late that I was saying it like a chant, as if I were working a spell. *It's over, it's over, it's over.*

It felt like the past few days were bodies, piling against a door, and now their weight had made the lock give way. My entire body heaved with suppressed gasps. I felt Emma adjust her grip, putting part of her body behind mine. She propelled me forward, guided me onto the couch, and sat in her previous spot. I kept fighting the sounds tearing through my insides.

Couldn’t let them out. Couldn’t wake Matthew. He was so young, and nothing scared children more than seeing someone in pain.

So I stayed where I was, concentrating on the feel of leather beneath my fingertips, and kept each and every one of those sobs down. Emma’s faded eyes lingered on my face, wrinkles deepening in her forehead and around her mouth. I started to tell her that I was okay, but the lie wouldn’t come.

Tears, hot and heavy, trailed down my cheeks. Those were the only thing that escaped—I still contained the noises sending my organs into a raucous dance, still shook with each one. It had become personal, this war with my body’s impulses.

“Oh, sweetheart.” Emma’s hand moved, hovering over mine. After a few seconds, she put it back in her lap. My head was bowed and I pretended not to see. Her voice lowered, becoming more earnest, as if we should be sitting in church pews instead of a thick-cushioned couch. “You’re going to make it through this. It may not seem like it right now… and you may not even want to at this point, but one day you’re going to wake up and realize that the worst is behind you. Do you know how I know that? Because you’re strong, Fortuna. You’re so strong that it breaks my heart to think what you must’ve endured to become that way. But that’s how I know you’ll survive.”

I couldn’t respond. Not yet. As the grief continued its journey through me, I searched for a box of tissue. I hadn’t once looked at the TV screen since entering the room, and now I finally noticed it. The scene playing hadn’t been paused, only muted. *I Love Lucy.* It was Emma’s favorite show.

“Thanks, Ems,” I said finally. My voice was watery. I hesitated, then rested my head on her frail shoulder. Emma’s nightgown reeked of the weed she must’ve been smoking earlier. The smell had become comforting to me.

“Cyrus told me about the choice you made,” she ventured. Emma said the words quietly, but I flinched as if she had shouted them.

Against my will, I thought of the last time I’d seen Cyrus. He’d stood in the yard, facing me, a glimmer of scales across his neck and a yellow tint to his eyes. Eyes filled with pain.

“I never should have put him in that position,” I said, voicing my thoughts out loud.

The old woman was silent for a moment. Her expression was thoughtful, her lips twisted as she considered what I'd said. "Do you regret it? Becoming human?" she asked.

"Yes," I said instantly. I didn't need to think about it. "But… it's what I deserve."

Emma snorted, telling me with a single sound what she thought of *that*. She turned her face toward the TV, but she didn't watch it. Her lips were twisted again. The pause was longer this time. Lucy and Ethel moved and spoke on the screen.

After a minute or two, Emma refocused on me. "You deserve to be happy, Fortuna. Is there a way to reverse it? The dragonfire?"

I was already shaking my head. I opened my mouth to answer, but something made me pause. I mentally replayed the question exactly as she'd asked it. *Is there a way to reverse it? The dragonfire?* It felt like someone had set off a tripwire. Internal alarms blared a warning. I went still, studying every inch of Emma's face. She looked back with concern, at first. When I didn't speak or look away, concern became confusion. Every expression looked genuine. Every reaction sincere.

I pretended to watch the show to buy myself some time. Agitation was coursing through my veins now, almost as strong as the drugs Belanor had given me. Without any explanation to Emma, I stood up. She remained silent as I went to the window and rested my fingertips against the cool glass.

Outside, Cyrus's porch lights cast a glow over the yard. Snow covered the ground and the trees were spindly, frosted sentries from another dimension. There were tiny footsteps around the base of each one, and at the sight of them, I let out a wistful breath that fogged the window. *Matthew.*

It felt so real. God, I hoped it was real. I swallowed my fear down and faced Emma again. "Why did you ask me about reversing the dragonfire?" I made myself ask.

The old woman frowned. She stayed where she was, resting her arm along the top of the couch. Beneath that frilly nightgown, the lines of her body looked tense. "I was just hoping there was a way to ease your pain," she said.

Wrong answer. My heart turned to iron and sank in my chest. Slowly I said, "Emma Miller would never ask me something like that. She likes to

let people come to her. Confide in her at their own pace."

That wasn't the only reason I was so certain something was off—it also seemed like she asked the question too quickly after I had supposedly just escaped a sadistic faerie. Emma Miller would be telling me to get some rest, or she'd distract me with chitchat about some mundane topic. Her favorite strain of marijuana, probably.

We looked at each other for another long moment.

"You're safe at home," Emma said abruptly. At that moment, she looked eerie, the pale glow from the television making her skin unnaturally white. "You're not suspicious of anything. You trust the human's motives for asking about the dragonfire."

Certainty tightened in my stomach.

"Who the fuck are you?" I hissed, pressing my back against the window. I darted a glance around us, instinctively searching for anything to use as a weapon. *Book. Painting. Flower vase.*

"She knows."

At this, my attention snapped back to Emma. Any lingering hope I might've had withered and collapsed to dust. Though her gaze never left my face, I knew these words weren't intended for me. She'd spoken with an accent I'd never heard her use before, and her features had slackened. A horrified scream lodged in my throat.

Before I could utter a sound, a new voice spoke, and it seemed to come out of nowhere. Through the vents and the walls. "You're not trying very hard, Claude," it chided.

"She's strong. It's not my fault," came the reply. It was the accented voice that had come out of Emma's mouth, but this time her lips weren't moving. She wasn't moving at all, in fact—the old woman stared at me with eyes that were cold and vacant. A puppet's eyes.

"Then I suppose it wouldn't be my fault if I had you executed, considering you've annoyed me," the second voice countered.

"I'm telling *maman* you said that."

There was a sigh.

Then I blinked, and I was back in the Nymphenburg Palace. Morning poured through the windows in pale streams. The change was too abrupt—for a terrible second, it was all I could do not to vomit. When it was safe to open my eyes again, I was greeted with the sight of Belanor standing in front of the fireplace. It was still unlit, as it had been since Fende left. The

future Seelie King had his arms tucked behind his back, and he wore a different suit from the last time I'd seen him. I was back in the extravagant bed. Back in chains. I resisted the urge to yank at them and scream my frustration.

Something moved on my other side. I whipped my face toward it with a panicked breath, forgetting the chains as adrenaline surged.

Sitting next to me, perched on the very edge of the mattress, was a fae youth. He was apple-cheeked and pouting, and the instant he saw I was awake, he leaped off the bed with a small sound of terror. His clothing looked like they'd been made in the 1700s, which meant his mother was probably ancient. The old ones were slower to adapt to modern ways.

"Good morning, Miss Sworn. Allow me to introduce you to my cousin, Claude of the bloodline Venhorn," Belanor said with a weary air. He didn't turn away from the fireplace, as if there truly were flames crackling in its depths. "A *distant* cousin. Fortunately for him, he's quite gifted, and therefore useful to me. Not to mention the many sizable donations his mother makes to the royal coffers. Doubtless it's how she manages to hold a chair on the council."

Gifted. I was still struggling to adjust, but my mind latched onto that word. It was the truth I'd needed to hear. The confirmation that none of it had been real. I wasn't safe at home, Belanor wasn't dead, and Emma hadn't told me I was strong.

But that didn't mean the Emma in the hallucination had been wrong.

My eyes went back to the young faerie, and suddenly I felt more clear-headed. There was a reason Belanor had summoned this boy, a purpose to him being in this room with us. I tried to remember what I'd heard them say in the hallucination with Emma.

You're not trying very hard.

She's strong. It's not my fault.

That was his "gift". This boy was getting in my head, somehow. Rummaging through my past and using it to Belanor's advantage. It was something I'd done, as a Nightmare, nearly every day—it wasn't the invasion that made my chest tighten with rage.

It was that he'd done it to my family. These were their memories, too. Their secret pains, too. Belanor could hurt me all he wanted, but they were off limits.

“We have much to do today,” he said now, his tone returning to that grating pleasantness. “Breakfast shall need to wait, seeing as your human biology has proven to be more… delicate than I thought it would be, and I simply can’t spare the staff to clean this room again. There also won’t be any time for bathroom breaks, so I’ve had Iris make some adjustments.”

It was that last word I actually heard. *Adjustments?* The instant I repeated it in my head, I noticed there was something foreign resting against me. I rushed to lift the blankets, breathing shallowly. When I saw the small plastic bag strapped to my leg, I said nothing. I couldn’t. Belanor’s healer had put a *urinary catheter* inside me? The feeling of invasion was so strong that, for a moment, I was back at the crossroads. Being touched when I didn’t want to be touched. My dignity stripped away.

Oblivious to how I was seething, the object of my fury turned and strolled toward the bed, talking all the while. His words were a meaningless hum. I bided my time like a spider on its web. Just as I’d hoped he would, Belanor underestimated the range I’d been given with the chains.

The instant he came within reach, I lunged.

It was so abrupt that Belanor moved a beat too late, and I seized a fistful of the prince’s hair as he tried to leap back. Some of it ripped off his scalp, and Belanor released the most girlish shriek I’d ever heard, his pale hands flying up to his head. He spun around. His attention zeroed in on my fingers, where I still clutched several silvery strands. When his gaze rose back to mine, I bared my teeth in an imitation of a smile, knowing that my eyes gleamed with triumph.

Belanor swung toward the open doorway, where two Guardians now stood, probably drawn by the noise. *“Where is Vulen?”* he hissed, spittle accompanying every word.

Their expressions were almost identical in how carefully impassive they seemed. “We haven’t been able to reach him, Your Highness,” the male on the right answered.

Belanor faced me again, and the expression on his face caused a stirring of real fear inside me. There were two spots of red in his cheeks. His eyes were open so wide the whites seemed to swallow everything else. As our eyes locked in a hostile stare, it felt like we were seeing each other

for the first time, without the masks of civility or pretense. Opponents across a battlefield.

Tearing his gaze from mine, Belanor spun to the boy and snapped his fingers. At some point, Claude had scurried off to the farthest corner of the room.

“Try again,” Belanor ordered. Behind him, the Guardians interpreted this as a dismissal, and they exited the room walking backward.

“Should I say the same things? About the old woman?” Claude asked in a small voice.

The doors closed with a gentle sound and a slight squeak. Belanor kept his gaze on Claude, a line between his brows. After another moment, he shook his head. “The Whisperer tells me she loves the Unseelie King. Perhaps he will be the key.”

Pouting again, the boy turned toward me. He edged closer, his soft body stiff with reluctance. *Needs physical proximity to use his abilities,* I noted.

As far as power limitations went, it was a big one—even when Claude was standing near the foot of the bed, he wasn’t close enough. The youth took one more step toward me. Then, another. His chin trembled in fear. It didn’t have a flavor, though, and the absence of something that I’d experienced all my life only fueled the fire of agitation burning inside me. I shifted away, knowing as I did that it was futile. The chains rattled.

Then Claude started talking, and all the thoughts in my head faded.

“You’re remembering the first time you met…” The young faerie hesitated. His eyes darted to Belanor in an anxious, wordless question. I stared at Claude with rapt focus.

“Collith,” the prince supplied with obvious exasperation, fussing with his hair.

“You’re talking to Collith,” Claude said quickly.

I watched his mouth form the words, and before they’d fully left his mouth, his face morphed into someone else’s. “How refreshing. A slave with spirit left in her,” a familiar voice said.

There was a blinding flash of sunlight. It came out of nowhere, and I raised my hand against it, squinting.

After a moment, the light eased enough that it seemed safe to look again. I lowered my hand and waited for my vision to adjust.

I was… in a clearing. It was a fall morning, the grass and trees not quite bare, but wearing gowns of yellow, red, and brown. Everywhere I looked, there was movement and sound. Tables and open-facing tents had been erected in haphazard rows. Cardboard signs with black marker displayed wares I'd only heard about during my parents' lectures and lessons. A creature that wore the glamour of a young woman offered a wide array of spells. There was a family of shapeshifters, all of them wearing colorful clothing, selling a variety of meats that included human. One stall appeared to only sell teeth. Most were in jars resting atop shelves, but others were displayed like jewelry. They were even in a long case, resting on a bed of velvet. As if they were something to be admired. Coveted.

It took me much too long to notice the male.

He stood a safe distance away, his hair curling against his neck and his kind eyes peering at me through the bars of a cage. *Wait. A cage?* I blinked rapidly, as if that would make the iron walls around me disappear. They didn't. I gripped the rusted bars with fingers that didn't feel like mine, and the air thrummed with urgency now.

"I can't find the key," the male said. "If you don't escape, you'll be sold to the highest bidder. You're a Nightmare, aren't you? Can't you use that?"

I'm not a Nightmare anymore. The words rose to my lips, startling me. Confusion swirled up and down my veins like small cyclones as I realized it was the truth. Now that I was aware, I couldn't believe that I hadn't noticed immediately. That sense of… otherness was gone. Of something more. For as long as I'd been alive, there had been a prickle in the air. Magic. Not just the use of glamours, but within the very oxygen.

That prickle had gone still.

Shock made everything feel slower. I blinked, becoming conscious of the fact I was staring at the stranger without speaking. Before I could ask him any questions, a new voice sliced through the crisp autumn breeze.

"Ten thousand dollar bid! Do I hear fifteen thousand? Now fifteen thousand, will you give me twenty thousand?"

There was an auction happening at the end of the row, appearing where there had been nothing but empty grass a moment ago. Two small podiums had been placed in front of a large projection screen. Facts were displayed on that screen. Gender. Species. Age. Behind this, beyond the tree line, I

saw the sky had changed, too. As if I'd traveled through time. The horizon was the color of a bruise, the sun slipping away like the skirt of a gown over a smooth floor.

My gaze returned to the projection screen. It swayed lightly in a breeze, easily readable in the dusk. It was obvious that the list of facts were about the small figure that stood on one of the podiums, her wrists bound in ropes that had been soaked in holy water, no doubt.

She couldn't have been older than ten.

My mouth was dry with horror. I almost didn't notice when two goblins broke away from the crowd. But I did notice, and when they started walking toward my cage, I gasped at a rush of memory. Those goblins were the ones who'd taken me here. Snatched me right off the mountain while I was grieving my brother and held me captive in their rank cabin for three days.

Oh, they are so dead. Nightmare or not, I'd make sure their endings were long and—

I made the mistake of blinking again, and suddenly *I* was on one of the platforms.

The auctioneer called out numbers to my right, and the handsome stranger now stood at the front of the crowd. His hazel eyes were fixed on my face again, but this time, they gleamed with fear. If we were anywhere else, I would've wondered who he was.

But there were more pressing questions at the moment. What if the person who bought me only wanted my heart? Eat a Nightmare's heart, and you'd be fearless. That was our urban legend.

Too bad it was also true.

With every second that passed, my death drew nearer. I gripped the bars and gave them a futile yank. Even though the moon was up, I was virtually helpless. None of the buyers clustered around the platforms seemed concerned that I'd escape, either. According to my own list of facts, I was just a human. The prospective buyers still bothering to look at me wore expressions that ranged from appraisal to contemplation. Panic pounded in my ears.

My powers. I had to use my powers.

Right now, it wasn't important that I couldn't remember how I'd lost them. What I did need to figure out was how to find them again. A drop of terror slid down the small of my back. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to

concentrate. Had Mom or Dad mentioned this during a lesson? All I could think of was Dad's lectures on control, and control was the opposite of what I needed. I needed to lose control.

Control. Lose control. The words were like striking a match. Memories hovered just out of reach, and beyond that small glow, I could only remember faint moments. I saw a pair of silver eyes, smiling into mine. I heard a male voice, lilting and conspiratorial. *Don't you know what strengthens a Nightmare's power? Unleashed fury. Pain. The things bad dreams are made of.*

While my mind worked, my gaze happened to fall upon the stranger again. I saw his eyes brighten with interest. "What did you just say?" he asked.

Every face in the clearing turned toward me. Shapeshifters, faeries, witches, humans, and creatures who looked like humans. All of them waited for my answer. Somewhere in the trees, a crow *caw*ed. The entire scene felt surreal, and suddenly I wondered if this was a bad dream. It had the foggy confusion of one.

Searching for some kind of confirmation or sign, I refocused on the beautiful stranger. He was still waiting for an answer. He had a long scar down the length of his face now. Strangely enough, I didn't question the sudden appearance of it. The scar… belonged there. It was as if his face had been missing something before. I had an inexplicable rush of feeling, and for a disorienting moment, I was absolutely certain he was someone I knew.

Collith. The name came from nowhere, and the instant I thought of it, I gasped. A thousand memories broke free inside my head, and it felt like they bounced off the walls of bone, causing shudders of agony.

"She's fighting me again," the auctioneer said into the microphone. His ill-fitting suit bunched around his shoulders and his eyes squeezed shut, as if he were in pain.

I didn't know what was happening, or why I was reliving this day, but I kept my eyes on Collith. He wasn't as I'd last seen him, during that terrible scene in the throne room. Instead, he was the version of Collith that I'd last kissed. Last touched. Last loved. The Collith who'd spent weeks transforming a dilapidated barn into a luxurious loft, all so my family would have a home. I wanted so badly to believe he was actually here. There was nothing to indicate he was a hallucination—no flickering,

no detail out of place. But my hope was a hollow thing, a child's dream. This auction wasn't real and Collith couldn't access my mind anymore.

In spite of all that, I stretched my hand toward him. Suddenly nothing else mattered except the ache of missing his touch. "Don't give up on me, okay?" I heard myself plead.

He frowned. I frowned.

Just as quickly as it had come, that feeling of familiarity was gone. I yanked my arm back through the bars of the cage. Why did I say that? There had been a softness to my voice that I'd never heard before. I glanced at the stranger again, and I wasn't surprised to see he was still looking at me. Why were there so many gaps in my mind?

The bidding continued.

Desperation filled my throat, trapping a frustrated cry. *Okay*, I thought. *Okay. Focus on your escape.*

First things first, I needed my abilities. If a Nightmare's power was fueled by the things bad dreams were made of, I had plenty of that. I gripped the cage bars in trembling fists and forced myself to think of the worst one. The crème de la crème of pain and fear. I blocked out the sight of the crowd by squeezing my eyes shut, and there, in the darkness, I revisited a memory that lived in it. Always waiting. Always ready for a chance to strike.

A dark hallway. A slumped shape on the floor. An open door. I heard my own screams. I saw my father's ruined body. Looking down at it again, I felt everything I had back then, along with all the rage of an adult. There was so much we had missed out on because of this night. Matthew and Christine Sworn would never meet their grandson. They would never finish the teachings they'd been so diligent about. They would never offer advice, or wisdom, or meet who their children had grown to become.

All that feeling built and built with nowhere to go. My eyes snapped open and I let out a gasping breath.

It wasn't working.

There were only a few in the crowd looking at me now. I didn't need to touch anyone to know I wouldn't feel their fear—that prickle hadn't returned. I was still holding onto the bars of the cage, and the auctioneer rattled off numbers with practiced speed. Even knowing what awaited me at the end of this bidding war, I couldn't get my powers back. And my head hurt. Why did it hurt so badly?

The stress was too much. I felt as helpless as a child again, and suddenly I *ached* to talk to Oliver.

"Who the fuck is Oliver?" a voice boomed from the sky.

I froze, and my heart felt like thunder as I searched the clouds. No one else at the auction reacted. Hadn't they heard that? The wind in the clearing strengthened. At first, I ignored it. A second passed, then two, and I heard something else. Faint snatches of conversation riding that wild gust of air, like someone on a runaway stallion. Too fast, too chaotic to catch any details.

"Tell us who Oliver is." This from a witch standing near the scarred stranger. Her warbled voice had a strange lilt to it, as if two accents were clashing. She looked every bit like the crone from a fairy tale, trying to lure children inside with candy and sweet smiles.

"He's my best friend," I answered immediately.

The witch turned her head, facing forward. The wind surged, and again, I heard something within it. Another voice, I thought, but more timid than the first one. Younger.

…she said… know what strengthens a Nightmare's… things bad dreams are made of…

I searched the trees beyond the clearing, convinced I'd see the owner of that voice standing within the shadows. Was this the work of a spell? Why did I get the feeling something even worse was happening?

Because something had, I realized. While I'd been straining to hear that strange voice, the bidding must've come to an end. The crowd was dispersing, many creatures holding onto their purchases by leads, as if they were chattel—I was the last sale, then.

I'd barely finished the thought when I saw a man with yellow teeth heading toward the platform. There was a sneer on his lips and a promise in his eyes. Something about that look made it utterly clear I was looking at the winning bidder. Terror screamed through me. Desperate, I bowed my head and silently begged my power to return.

Nothing.

Even now, when I most wanted it, I couldn't find the Nightmare part of myself.

Jerking upright in a burst of frustration, I watched the man with yellow teeth speak to the auctioneer. I knew I needed to use these final seconds. To *think*. Dad had believed there was always a way out. No matter how

impossible a fight or a situation seemed, there would be another move to make or idea to try.

Being human didn't change that, not to the father who'd once tied me to a chair and ordered me to free myself, again and again, until I could do it within minutes.

We'd never covered this scenario, though.

Just as my new owner finished his conversation with the auctioneer and faced me, the other voice returned. It echoed from the blue expanse above. "Let's use that," it said.

Use that? I thought wildly.

"You believe you're with Oliver now," the wind told me. My head snapped to the side, but there was no one standing beside me. "You're in the place you feel safest."

Everything went white.

I squeezed my eyes shut against the brightness and pain. It hurt so much. Oh, God, it *hurt*. I tried to reach up and find the source of the agony, but suddenly it felt like I didn't have a body. Someone was talking nearby. I moaned and tried to focus on the words. I heard Oliver's name, the syllables laced with tension and fear.

Then everything… stopped.

Silence rang all around. Light still streamed through my eyelids, but it was more gentle now. I stayed on my knees, calming with every breath. Whatever I'd been thinking before was gone, along with whatever I'd been feeling, too. The sensation was like falling asleep.

Gradually, as if someone were turning a volume knob, the noise of cicadas filled my ears. I could smell wildflowers. Seagulls called to each other nearby.

I was already smiling when I opened my eyes to the dreamscape.

The golden grass was doused in hues of violet and pink. The roar of the ocean sounded in the distance. The stone cottage stood atop one of those rolling hills, gray and worn by time. I looked around, my smile softening into relief, and suddenly I felt looser. I stood up and strolled down the trodden path, arms swinging, sundress fluttering. Why did it feel like I hadn't been here in weeks? God, it was good to be home.

"Hey, you."

That voice. It felt like my heart tried to shatter through my chest, as if it had heard the one it truly belonged to.

I spun around and spotted Oliver’s silhouette against the horizon of our dreamscape, his tousled hair shining, the cords in his arms standing on end as he leaned back on them. He was looking at me over his shoulder with that achingly familiar grin, his dimples visible even from a distance. Though I was far away, I knew his legs dangled over the edge of the cliff, his jeans dampening from the sea spray. It was a scene I’d seen a thousand times, and a thousand times, I’d wished so badly that it was more than a fantasy.

“Ollie,” I said with unveiled joy, smiling back. The muscles in my face ached, as if I hadn’t done that in a long time.

In response, Oliver got to his feet and began closing the distance between us. A breeze moved past, urging me forward like the gentlest of nudges. Just as I started to obey, I heard something. A sound that didn’t belong here, a place where I knew every sound like it was my own heartbeat. I went still, my smile dimming. Was that a… voice?

Was there someone else in the dreamscape?

I raised my gaze to Oliver’s, who was still several yards away. He frowned. *What’s wrong?* his expression asked, reverting back to our old way of communicating. He hadn’t done it in years. Nostalgia gripped my heart like a pinch as I thought of the boy he’d once been. Thin. Quiet. Serious. I’d coaxed him from a shell just as much as he’d coaxed me out of mine.

“It’s nothing,” I said, raising my voice above the breeze. “I thought I __”

Oliver’s back bowed, much like Finn’s did when he was changing forms. He opened his mouth and let out a scream that curdled my insides. I ran to him, crushing the grass instead of parting it as I usually did. Oliver was on his knees by the time I got there, his chest heaving. His fingers curled into fists, leaving tracks through the dirt.

“Ollie, what’s happening?” I asked. My demeanor was calm, a mask I wore for his sake, but beneath it I was blank with terror. My hand rested on his shoulder, the only spot that seemed safe to touch. “Oliver, look at me.”

In a wrench of pain, he rolled onto his other side. That was when I saw his face.

Half of it was gray and frozen into place. I stared at him with mute horror. The truth stared back, and my mind resisted accepting it.

Oliver was becoming stone.

My best friend shouted again, throwing his head back. What remained of his features twisted in agony. I was still touching his shoulder, and though I knew it wasn't truly helping him, I couldn't bring myself to let go.

"How do I stop this?" I asked evenly. "Tell me what to do, Ollie."

"My existence is tied to your Nightmare essence," he rasped.

At this, my mask slipped a little, and a tightness in my voice betrayed me. "I'm not a Nightmare anymore," I heard myself tell Oliver.

Not at Nightmare anymore? Did I really just say that? A hundred questions went off in my mind, but Oliver didn't question me. He looked up, shivering, a sheen of sweat gleaming on the part of his forehead that was still flesh. "Then become one again," he said simply.

"How did—" I stopped, trying not to scream at the sight of Oliver. Whatever confusion I felt was overshadowed by horror. Gray crept up the column of my best friend's throat now, and the stone made a subtle crackling sound as it formed.

When Oliver caught my hand, I didn't know if it was to comfort me or himself. He started to say something, but another grimace of pain kept him from speaking. He squeezed his eyes shut and breathed raggedly. "Help me, Fortuna. Save me."

I frowned.

Not right, instinct whispered. Something wasn't right about any of this. Slowly, I pulled my hand out of Oliver's. He threw his head back and gasped my name. I winced at the suffering in his voice. The stone crept over his shoulders, then jumped to parts of his jaw.

"You would never ask me to do something like that," I forced myself to say, even as part of me longed to touch him again. Offer comfort however I could. The stone had claimed more than half of his body now. Oliver started to speak, but I shook my head, hard, as if I could get all the doubts out. Words tumbled out with them. "No. Lies, these are all lies. I know my best friend. I know the dreamscape we grew up in. This isn't my safe place."

With that, I smashed my hands over my ears and backed away. I could still hear Oliver shouting, which quickly turned to screams of agony. I closed my eyes and shook my head, denying him, clinging to that sense of wrongness. I *knew* Oliver. He could change in a thousand ways, but there was no version of my friend that would ask me to save him.

After a few seconds, the screams cut short.

Dreading what I would see, I looked up slowly. My frown deepened when I saw the Oliver imposter hadn't turned to stone. Instead, he sat quietly in the grass with his eyes directed upward, as if he were hearing something I wasn't. His expression confirmed that my instincts were right not to trust him—I'd never seen the real Oliver make that face before. As if he were on the verge of a tantrum.

"Again," a voice said from the heavens.

There was no chance to react. Between one blink and the next, Oliver and the dreamscape were gone, stolen from me yet again.

I stood there, swaying with confusion and pain. I dimly noted that I was in a bedroom. A yellow bedroom. There was a crib to my left made of white wood. How did I get here? Who had I just been talking to? It felt like I'd left something unfinished. A conversation or a thought, maybe…

At the same moment I comprehended that I was holding something, a cooing sound reached my ears. I looked down slowly, my heartbeat like a drum.

A child rested in my arms, her face pink and scrunched, with surprisingly dark eyelashes. The silky hair on her head was dark, too. She was wrapped in a star-covered blanket that was soft against my skin.

I didn't have a memory of carrying her, giving birth to her, but love for this tiny person swelled in my breast. A love that had no match, regardless of how fiercely I would fight for all the people back home. I touched her downy skin, seeing Collith in the shape of her mouth, recognizing myself in the beauty mark beneath her left eye. I didn't even think to question anything else, like why I didn't remember any events leading up to this moment.

"Christine," I whispered. "That's your name. I always said I'd name my first daughter after her grandmother. I'm going to tell you all about her. She—"

The words stuck in my throat as Christine's mouth opened in a gummy smile. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. She reached for my face with one tiny hand, still beaming from ear to ear, and I hurried to lean in.

At the exact instant those small fingers made contact with my cheek, her smile vanished. So did mine. I couldn't see what was wrong; I just knew something was. "What is it, sweetheart?" I whispered.

Thinking to check her diaper, I reached for the edge of the blanket.

That's when Christine's face started to rot.

I bit back a scream, not wanting to hurt her, scare her, but I held the baby tighter. *Call 9-1-1*, an inner voice commanded. Tearing my horrified gaze from Christine's misshapen features, I scanned the room. There wasn't a phone anywhere in sight, and I noticed for the first time that I was wearing a nightgown, which meant no pockets to hold a cell phone. Frantic with terror, I rushed toward the door.

Her cheek caved in.

"No! Stop!" I screamed, falling to my knees. I didn't know who I was speaking to. God, maybe. My daughter was dying and only a higher power could save her. *Magic*, I thought desperately. Magic could help Christine.

As if she were a faerie, summoned with a single thought, Mercy appeared in the corner of the room. She wore modern clothes and her long hair was in a ponytail at the base of her neck. She assessed the situation in an instant. "There is a spell I could do. To save her," the witch said.

No time to question how she'd known to come. I jumped up and fought the instinct to thrust my baby toward Mercy. It seemed possible that she could break or crumble from any sudden movements. "Do it! Please!" I cried.

Mercy didn't come closer. Her expression was hard. "It requires the blood of a Nightmare."

Fuck. I could donate every drop in my veins, but it wouldn't be the blood my baby needed. There was only one person alive who could help her now. "Damon," I blurted. "We'll get Damon and—"

She was already shaking her head. "He's at work. By the time he got here, the child would be dead."

"He's the last one. There are no others!"

"Become a Nightmare again, Fortuna." Mercy said this as if it were obvious, her voice thin with impatience. She gestured roughly at the bundle in my arms. "It's the only way."

Fine. Okay. Anything. I nodded so hard that it hurt. "How? Tell me how, and I'll do it."

"Pull your power back to you. Reach deep. Release the anger, and fear, and self-loathing. Accept yourself for who you are."

It felt like small earthquakes were rumbling inside my skull. My stomach churned. What had I been doing before coming into this room?

Why couldn’t I remember waking up this morning? Why exactly was my baby rotting in my arms?

A dangerous calm filled me.

Sniffling, I looked back down at that tiny face. She’d gone quiet now. Her fluttering eyelashes were the only indication there was still life inside her body. Blinking rapidly to keep my vision clear, I started singing in a whisper. “Hush, little baby, don’t say a word. Mama’s going to buy you a mockingbird…”

Still singing, I set the baby into her crib as if she were made of something more breakable than glass. She slept on, unperturbed, a tiny fist resting against her cheek. Flakes of her skin fell onto the sheets. It felt like part of my heart rotted, too, as I turned away from her.

Then I took three steps, closing the distance between me and Mercy, and drew back my fist. Her eyes widened just before I rammed it into her face.

A lot of things happened simultaneously after that. First, the stillness detonated with sound. Screaming and shouting from people I couldn’t see, the din so overwhelming that it sent me to my knees, hands clapped over my ears. The second thing that started happening involved the room itself, which was completely empty now. It was like everything had vanished into thin air. Including, I saw with a burst of panic, the crib and the baby inside of it. The floorboards were rising, clacking like teeth. I knelt in the center of the chaos, still incapacitated by the noises that were crushing my bones and boiling my blood.

“Again, goddamnit,” a voice snarled over the sounds of the walls coming apart.

The grip on my mind vanished, and suddenly I knew it was Belanor who’d spoken. The Seelie Prince, soon to be king, who needed a Nightmare for a spell. He’d heard me say Laurie’s words, or Claude had passed them on to him. *Don’t you know what strengthens a Nightmare’s power? Unleashed fury. Pain. The things bad dreams are made of.* Now he was using my memories, my family, my love against me to do exactly that.

The next time I blinked, I was back in reality. My head was pounding.

Claude stood across the room now, one of his hands splayed over his bleeding nose. He wasn’t wailing anymore, as he’d been doing moments ago, but his shoulders shook with silent sobs.

Belanor looked at him expectantly, and I remembered the order I'd heard him give while I was still trapped in the grip of Claude's magic. *Again, goddamnit.* I stiffened.

Seconds ticked by, silent and tense, as Belanor and I waited for the boy's response. His nose was probably healing already, but his body continued trembling. I watched the young courtier unravel and felt no pity or remorse. I would never apologize for fighting back.

"You can fight back, too, you know," I told Claude in a voice made of rust. Hearing it made me frown—I must've been screaming during the hallucinations. A lot. I met the boy's gaze and added, "If you don't like doing the things Belanor tells you to. He's just a bully. What does your *maman* have to say about bullies?"

When Claude made a snorting sound, a bubble of snot and blood bursting from between his fingers, Belanor's eyes rolled heavenward. "Perhaps it's time to call it a day. Thank you for your assistance, Lord Venhorn. It will not be forgotten."

"I should hope not, Your Majesty," Claude's muffled voice replied. Still cupping his face, his skin now a mottled color, he edged toward the doors. When Belanor didn't stop him, the young faerie abandoned all pretense. The buckles on his shoes clinked as he hastened the rest of the way, leaving a trail of blue drops. I must've gotten him good. A faint smirk curved my lips, and I tipped my head back to rest it against the headboard. I heard the door open and close. The jangle of those obnoxious shoes faded.

Once the boy was gone, silence covered the room like a layer of snow. I knew Belanor hadn't left. I waited for his next move with every moment bringing me closer to sleep.

"Was it my brother who taught you to shield your mind?" he asked finally.

Something in his tone made me lift my head. Sweat still dribbled down my temples, remnants from the mental battle with Claude. I had no more strength left—not today—and I couldn't even muster a glare. I met Belanor's gaze tiredly, wondering how many days it had been since I'd been taken from Granby. Right now, it felt like I'd been here for weeks.

"No. That would be our ex, Collith Sylvyre," I intoned.

The prince's expression didn't change, but I felt the intensity of his focus. Evaluating me again, learning everything he could in order to

exploit it. Slowly he murmured, “Until tomorrow, Lady Sworn.”

He put his back to me and started walking toward the doors. “You haven’t had enough yet?” I called after him, a note of mocking in my words.

Belanor’s narrow shoulders stiffened. He turned again, but stopped before he was fully facing me. He kept his gaze directed at the wall as he said, “I’ve tried to be courteous. I’ve tried to be a good host. And you have repaid my kindness like a commoner. So I shall treat you like a commoner, Miss Sworn.”

Something about his posture made my bravado wither. It was that unnerving stillness a predator displayed just before it attacked.

Thankfully, Belanor didn’t wait for a response. He turned and strode out. I tensed, expecting him to slam the door. Instead, he pulled it shut slowly. The latch clicked into place with such gentleness that I didn’t hear it this time.

I stared at that doorknob and thought, *Round one, Belanor. Round two, Fortuna.*

Silence rushed into the dimming room. The sweat on my skin cooled. Darkness kept creeping close and retreating in exhausting intervals. After a while, it became apparent that I wouldn’t be getting any tray deliveries. Probably for the best. I was weak with hunger, and I probably wouldn’t be able to resist Belanor’s drugged food. My earlier plan to chew through the bedding would need to wait—right now, my body pleaded for sleep. I couldn’t summon the strength to resist. As much as I loathed it, the catheter was about to come in handy.

I closed my eyes again. Something told me I’d need every advantage I could get for round three. I’d seen the look on Belanor’s face, and it was one I had seen on others before him. He was evil. The thing about evil people was that, as a general rule, they were also driven.

Belanor was just getting started.

CHAPTER FOUR

I dreamed of a tree.

A great, eerie, many-limbed tree, lending it the look of a sea monster, surrounded by a strange sea of shadows, underbrush, and other trees that couldn't compare. The sun rose behind it, sending streams of light through the spaces between branches. I stepped closer, and a stick snapped beneath my foot. I hardly noticed—my attention was riveted to that wooden sea monster. I put out my hand, settling it slowly on the bark. I tensed the moment I made contact, as if I expected the tree to react in some way. Twist and sway those arms, maybe, or creak into the stillness.

At the same moment I arched my head back, trying to get a better look at the inner sanctum of those gnarled branches, a scream shattered my ears.

Just as a bolt of terror went through me, the dream ended.

Panting, I opened my eyes to a smooth, white ceiling. The instant I saw that, I knew I wasn't in the enormous bedroom anymore. My heart ricocheted, and with a wince, I managed to sit up. Was this another hallucination? Belanor had turned my own mind against me, and I didn't trust what I was seeing. No matter how real it seemed.

I took stock of my new surroundings. Fluorescent lights made the space blinding. It was even colder than the other one. I suspected I was underground. From my time at the Unseelie Court, I knew the smell intimately. Frozen dirt and must. There was no furniture, no windows, and no colors. The walls and floor were padded, making me feel like I was sitting in the center of a giant marshmallow—even the toilet was covered. A single roll of toilet paper had been placed on top of the water tank.

This was what I imagined the inside of a mental hospital to look like. Especially combined with the fact that I was wearing scrubs and my feet were covered in flat, laceless, rubber-soled shoes.

Unlike a hospital, though, there was absolutely no sound coming from beyond the door. Not even footsteps.

Fresh questions swirled through me. Was I still at the palace? Why the change of scenery? Was this just another hallucination? Too many questions, and not a single answer.

Though I knew there wouldn't be a way out, I still checked the door because I'd be a fool not to. But it was like something from a spaceship or a lab, in that there was no knob or lock. There weren't even hinges. I ran my fingers over the white surface, frowning. Did the door just slide up, then?

I supposed that I'd find out soon enough. I backed away from it, letting out an anxious breath. *Now what?*

The stillness made it impossible to ignore my throbbing shoulder. Strangely enough, I welcomed the pain—it meant the drugs were definitely out of my system. It also seemed like evidence that I was truly awake and these padded walls were real.

If I wasn't in a dream, then Belanor would be stopping by soon. Or someone worse.

My mind filled with the memory of the Seelie Prince sitting in that tufted chair. His eyes gleaming like bits of metal while he watched me scream and burn.

Fear breathed down my neck now, a hot and acrid sensation. Since waking up, part of me must've still been lost within that drugged haze, because I hadn't felt any panic or urgency. Now it descended upon me like a grizzly bear, tearing at my mind with teeth and claws. I couldn't run. I couldn't hide. Belanor would return, and he didn't play by the same rules as his brother. He might actually kill me.

Occupied. I needed to keep myself occupied.

While I waited for someone to come, I went through the exercises Dad had taught me. I did sit ups. I jogged in place. It wasn't long until my crisp, white scrubs clung to my back.

I kept it up for one hour. Then, two. I lost track of time after that, because my ribs started aching and I stopped moving. Spent at last, I sat

down and carefully rested against the wall, mindful of the still-healing brand.

“I must really be awake,” I muttered. No dream or hallucination would be this *boring*.

I kept waiting. No one had thought to hang a clock in the room—or maybe it was intentional—so I had no way of knowing how much time had passed. As more seconds ticked by, the quiet started to feel substantial. Like a thickness in the air. Like a weight pressing down on me and filling my lungs. I couldn’t let myself think about Belanor, even though I probably should have been. I still needed to make a plan for escape and my captor’s weaknesses would play a key role in that.

But I was just a human now. I was tired. I had limitations.

With nothing else to do, I closed my eyes. The light was so harsh that it filled my skull with red. I cracked one eye open and cast an irritated glance toward each wall, hoping to spot a light switch. There were none, of course. I covered my face and swallowed a sigh. Despite the chill that clung to the air and the sweat cooling on my skin, I didn’t let myself shiver, either—I knew there was probably a camera on me. I wouldn’t give Belanor the satisfaction of seeing my discomfort.

After the torture and the drugs, I thought I’d fall asleep instantly. But it felt like I’d been in a car accident, my veins vibrating. I tried all of my old tricks, including the ones from childhood. Counting sheep, meditation, telling myself a dull story. The lights didn’t turn off, but the floor was soft and one of my methods started working. I felt my thoughts slip into the spaces between stars, where the dreamscape used to be waiting.

Then ear-splitting music exploded into the silence.

I leaped up, shrieking, and clapped my hands over my ears. It took a few seconds to separate the sounds and discern that I was listening to heavy metal rock. *Sleep deprivation*, I thought as I cringed, retreating against the wall again. That was Belanor’s new plan. Was he hoping to provoke the Nightmare to come out and protect me? Save me?

I needed to fall asleep. It was the only way to beat him in this particular battle. He probably wouldn’t come here until I was a Nightmare or dead. There was a third option he was too arrogant to consider—that I wouldn’t succumb to fear or exhaustion. That a *human* could survive against him.

I gritted my teeth and resettled on the floor, in the same position I'd been in before. Once again, I tried to drift into unconsciousness, this time with blinding lights and deafening music bouncing off every padded surface. The exercising had been a mistake, I admitted silently, because I still hadn't warmed up after the sweat dried. Allowing myself a moment of weakness, I wrapped my arms around my shoulders in a hollow imitation of an embrace.

Once upon a time, there was a sad girl, I thought with eyes squeezed shut. *She slept in a room with other children, but she always felt alone. She remembered her life before the crowded house. A time when she was loved, and didn't need to hide who she was. Years of magic and laughter. Now she felt like she would never laugh again. All of that changed, however, when she met the boy in her dreams.*

I told myself only the good parts, and even if I didn't manage to fall asleep, I did find a place of peace. A place that felt like the dreamscape I missed so much. Swaying grass. Wisps of clouds. A breeze that smelled like wildflowers. A tall figure off in the distance.

It felt like days later when the door opened.

I shot upright again, rigid with dread. *I was right,* I thought dimly—the door did slide upward within the wall. I steeled myself to see Belanor enter the blinding space. Instead of Laurie's evil twin, a Guardian came in with a plastic tray. I didn't recognize him. He was short for a faerie, but no less muscled and smooth-skinned. His dark hair was shoulder-length and tucked behind his ears. The music didn't pause or lower as the Guardian bent and put the food on the floor. His armor clanked with every movement, barely audible over the sound of the electric guitars.

Even after he'd left and the door was closed again, I didn't eat. Starvation would be better than falling down that black hole again. I turned my body away and curled up again. More time passed, and the same Guardian eventually returned, another tray in hand. He set it down and picked up the one I'd ignored. He left a second time.

There wasn't a third. After that, the food stopped coming. The tray stayed right where it was, getting cold and taunting me. Hunger gnawed at my stomach. I started allowing myself glances toward the tray. It looked like hot soup and freshly-made bread, if the steam coming off it was any indication. There was nothing to distract from it—not even the music could occupy my thoughts, because there were no lyrics. Only screams.

Screams, I thought again. The word triggered something inside me. Screams were my lullaby, my language, my addiction. Belanor thought the music would be my downfall; I'd make it my salvation.

I didn't have magic anymore, but there was magic in a change of perspective. I listened to the noise coming out of the hidden speakers and pretended it was one of the monsters I'd fed upon. I remembered that rush of power and euphoria. At long last, I felt myself drift into something resembling sleep. But it was light, part of me still faintly aware of the white room just beyond my eyelids.

Which was how I noticed when the music came to an abrupt stop.

I reluctantly cracked my eyes open, slow to return to full consciousness. I was tempted to ask Belanor to kill me just so I could get more sleep.

I was still debating when a voice drifted into the silence.

I twitched like a startled animal. I knew it had to be Belanor, this time, since the Guardian hadn't spoken a word during his brief visits. I found the strength to fully sit up, because I wouldn't face Belanor lying down.

"Back to donate some more hair?" I rasped, lifting my gaze. By sheer force of will, I mustered a taunting smile.

That smile froze on my face when I saw who stood in the doorway.

Jassin stared back at me.

For once, I didn't question whether this was reality or a dream. All that mattered was getting away.

Adrenaline surged, carrying strength and speed with it. My weakened body jolted into movement, sliding along the wall. I left a trail of sweat in my wake—it soaked right through the scrubs they'd put on me. Only one thought pounded at my mind like a blacksmith at the forge.

I can't let him touch me.

Those hands were covered in my brother's blood, his pain, his desperate love. If those hands touched me, I knew I'd spew vomit everywhere.

But there was nowhere to run. Jassin was blocking the door.

Freezing like a trapped rabbit, I watched him cross the room with wide-eyed, mute terror. He was wearing different clothes than the ones he'd died in. These were more modern, which was an odd choice for the neurons in my brain to make, considering I'd never seen Jassin in jeans before.

"You're dead," I whispered, tensing. Readying to lash out at him the moment he came within reach. "This isn't real."

The faerie didn't respond. His silence seemed like the evidence I was desperately searching for—a confirmation this was nothing more than one of Belanor's games—because the monster I'd known wouldn't have missed an opportunity to gloat or say something cutting. Pain and fear were like aphrodisiacs to him.

Jassin drew closer, and with every step, his face changed. The shifts were subtle, at first. So subtle I didn't notice what was happening until he loomed over me and I realized the shape of his face was different. The slant to his eyebrows became gentler, the hair a shade paler. Another second, another blink, and suddenly he was vastly shorter, too. Maybe the shortest faerie I'd ever seen. The bones of his wrists looked fragile and his gray eyes were wary and watchful, like a rabbit's.

Not Jassin, I thought numbly, as if my emotions had shut down like an overheated computer. This was a faerie I'd never met before. But the realization didn't stop the tremors that had started to wrack my body like small earthquakes.

As I shook, I kept staring at the hallucination kneeling in front of me. Why had my mind conjured a vision of a stranger? A stranger who bore an eerie resemblance to a faerie I'd never want to see again?

The faerie was saying something now. His voice had a pleasant, husky edge to it. Nothing like the oily tones that used to come out of Jassin's mouth.

When I didn't answer, the redhead leaned forward to brush a stray hair out of my face. Somehow the touch penetrated the fog of exhaustion around my mind. I'd actually felt that. His skin was cool, like Collith's was. Now that he was close enough, I could smell him, too. A scent that was faint and earthy.

This stranger was *real*.

"Oh my God. Don't leave," I gasped, reaching up to grab his arm. He was so solid. I couldn't breathe for the wave of relief that crashed over me.

It was just the exhaustion making reality hazy—not drugs or Claude. This was really happening. Jassin was still dead.

The faerie gave me a single moment to gather myself, then he pulled free of my grasp and spoke with quiet urgency. “I’ve brought some sustenance, but you’ll need to eat quickly.”

Jassin’s features were completely gone now, and whatever similarities they shared were overshadowed by the differences. Studs lined the rim of this faerie’s right ear. His hair was parted on one side, revealing that half of his scalp was shaved. He wore the armor of a Guardian, and light shone behind him.

The light. I realized the door was open, and another jolt of adrenaline went through me. Only my training kept me from launching toward it; I didn’t know anything about the faerie kneeling between me and that door.

The thought made me tense again. I’d been so relieved that my visitor wasn’t Jassin or a hallucination that I had forgotten to worry about his actual identity, or why he’d come. I looked at his armor again and felt the faint pinch of suspicion. “Who are you?” I asked.

“A friend.” The faerie set something down next to my splayed fingers. I spared a glance and saw that he really had brought food, the tray it rested upon made of gleaming silver. The plastic tray was gone, along with the food I hadn’t been able to trust.

The briefness of the stranger’s answer told me that he was either short on time or frightened. Probably both. But I couldn’t let this opportunity pass me by, especially since it might be the only one I got.

“Where am I?” I pressed, ignoring the food and how my stomach rumbled at the sight of it.

Impatience flitted through the faerie’s eyes. “Rooms beneath the palace,” he said shortly. “Many of the guests aren’t well, so everything is padded for their protection.”

“Guests? Protection?” I murmured, trying to subtly measure the distance between me and freedom. “Is that the pretty lie you tell yourself to hide the ugly truth?”

“Prince Belanor’s words. Not mine.” The copper-haired faerie nodded at the tray, his face still expressionless. “Perhaps you should focus on that instead of the door. Now is not the right time to escape, trust me. The only reason I’m posted down here is because the detainment floor is so well-fortified. Your strength is better spent eating.”

“Trust you?” I echoed. The Guardian just waited.

Detainment unit. Such a fancy name for a dungeon. It occurred to me that he could be lying, about everything, but what if he was telling the truth? I focused on the contents of the tray, trying to think clearly. It was hard when my head felt so light. This meal was still in sealed wrapping, a subtle reassurance that it hadn’t been tampered with. Was that ham?

I didn’t bother having the internal debate on whether or not to eat it. As soon as the food touched my tongue, I forgot to be self-conscious. I was ravenous, tearing at the bread with my teeth and barely tasting it before the pieces slid down my throat. Water dripped off my chin as I took huge gulps from the bottle that had appeared in front of me, as well.

The faerie spoke while I ate.

“You’ve proven that the usual techniques won’t give Belanor what he wants, so he’s going to change tactics,” he said. A note of warning had entered his pleasant voice.

I laughed mirthlessly and took another bite. “Okay. What’s next? Waterboarding? Electrocution?”

“Something more psychological would be my guess—that’s Belanor’s trademark. He’s had a plan in the works for a few days now. I’ve heard screams coming from one of the other cells.” The faerie got to his feet and backed away, his mouth a thin line. He took the silver tray with him. “I can give you a little time with the music off, but not much. You should sleep while you can.”

“Wait.” I appraised him again, perplexed. “Why are you helping me? Who are you?”

The faerie’s lips tipped upward into a wry smile. “We don’t have time to talk about my reasons. As to who I am, well, I believe you made my father’s acquaintance.”

He’s Jassin’s son, I thought with a sour taste in my mouth. It was obvious. That was why they looked so similar, regardless of the differences in stature. But I still needed to ask, if only to confirm what I already knew. “Who’s your father?”

The faerie stepped back and reached for something out of view, just beside the door. “Before I came to the Seelie Court, I was known as Peeks of the bloodline Sarwraek.”

Hearing that surname out loud made me flinch. The past pounced in an explosion of howls and swiping claws. In place of where Peeks stood, I

saw a long-haired figure. Feline eyes shining gold in the torchlight. A silver ring with snake scales.

I was about to compare their faces again when Peeks pressed whatever he'd put his hand on, and the door slid shut with a hissing sound.

"Goodbye to you, too," I muttered, leaning my head against the soft wall. What if I'd just made a huge mistake, and that had been my first and only chance to escape?

Too late to do anything about it, now. My eyes fluttered shut of their own volition. The absence of that eternal noise felt strange, and suddenly I was struck by an urge to cry. Cry as hard and as long as I could, to let out some of the grief and fear before I had to stuff it all back inside again. I didn't give in to it. The music may have been dormant, but that didn't mean the cameras were.

I can give you a little time, Peeks had said. What did that mean? A few minutes? An hour?

I'd take whatever he could give me. If I didn't get some sleep, my mind would deteriorate even further, along with my body. Absorbing the fact that I'd just met Jassin's son would need to wait. I curled into a ball again, trying to block out the relentless light.

By some miracle, I did manage to slip into unconsciousness. I went to a place of pure, incandescent darkness that even the bad dreams couldn't find.

The next time I woke up, I wasn't alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

The new male in my cell wasn't Belanor, Peeks, or the other Guardian I'd seen during my time down here.

Though he must've heard me shift in surprise, he didn't react. The stranger sat upright, his legs spread, wrists resting loosely on top of his knees. His head was bent and his eyes were closed. Maybe he was asleep. It was entirely possible, considering the music still hadn't returned. Either Peeks was keeping it off, or Belanor's next game had begun.

I was betting on the latter.

I studied the stranger more closely—he looked like the lead singer in a bad rock band. He even had the pinkish tint in his eyes, as if he were nursing a hangover from the night before, or probably still a little drunk. For clothing, the male wore a leather jacket and dark jeans. His blond hair was the sort of color that had obviously come from a box. Tattoos peeked out from beneath his sleeves. He was appealing, in a grungy sort of way.

Spike, I thought blearily. *He looks like Spike from Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Prettier, though.*

The comparison almost made me smile… then I realized that Spike Wannabe wasn't bound or secured to the wall. Ice-cold fear trickled through my veins. Suddenly I felt more awake. Alert. I didn't know this person, and Belanor had put him in here for a reason. I was weak and vulnerable.

"You don't need to worry about *that* happening. I'd rather stick my finger in an electrical outlet."

The sound of his voice made me jump. My new cell mate spoke with a British accent, further strengthening the mental image of Spike. He still

hadn’t opened his eyes. He certainly seemed too calm to be a prisoner of the Seelie Court.

A beat later, I processed his words. I felt my eyebrows furrow. Was I that obvious, or had Belanor stuck another “gifted” cousin in the same room as me? What was his game here?

“And I should just believe you?” I said, striving to sound neutral.

The male lifted his head, his lips puffing out on a sigh. He finally turned his face toward me, and I saw his eyes were brown. Not dark, like Finn’s, but something lighter. Like autumn leaves just before the snow arrived. “You should, because I’m asexual as fuck, and I’d have to be a complete tosser to lie about something like that.”

God, I wanted to believe him. Having an ally in this place could change everything, not to mention ease the constant weight of feeling so alone. But trusting the wrong person in my world could get you killed.

“Who are you?” I asked. I kept my gaze riveted to his face as I waited for an answer; even skilled liars had a tell.

The stranger had closed his eyes again. But now his posture wasn’t quite so relaxed. “My name is Gil,” was all he said. He didn’t ask for my name.

His behavior was unnerving. Why wasn’t he asking *me* any questions? Theories went around like flurries inside my mind. Maybe Gil had been here for so long that he wasn’t fazed by cell shifts anymore. Or maybe he was using his abilities on me at that very moment, sliding through my psyche like a snake in the grass.

Fear gripped me by the throat, making me sound more curt than I meant to. “Nice to meet you, Gil, but that doesn’t answer my question. Who are you, and why are you in this cell?”

“I’m as clueless as you are, sweetheart,” he said tightly. “I was walking down an alley in London, and I heard something come up from behind a second before I got knocked out.”

“If you’re a prisoner, then why didn’t they put you in scrubs?” I challenged.

“Jesus Christ, I don’t know, human. Why don’t we ask the nice kidnappers next time we see them?” Finally looking agitated, the stranger lifted his head and patted all his pockets, as though he were searching for his wallet or the car keys.

If he was working for Belanor, he was one hell of an actor.

The aggravation in his expression matched the reaction I'd seen in Peek's eyes. That was twice in twenty-four hours I'd managed to annoy someone, I thought. It was one more side effect of becoming human, no doubt. As a Nightmare, even when I pissed someone off, there was always that underlying desire. It was difficult to truly dislike a person who made the pleasure center of your brain light up every time you looked at them.

At least I'd learned one thing—I wasn't in a cell with another human. The way Gil had said the word was revealing enough.

The confirmation that he was Fallen made my distrust rise higher. Silence swelled around us, slightly suffocating. I didn't know what else to say. How else I could test Gil to discern whether he was telling the truth. I thought about taking advantage of the music's continued absence and trying to rest some more, but I knew I'd never be able to fall asleep with this stranger in the room.

"The tattoo on your hand," I ventured, glancing at it again. I couldn't see much, only a glimpse of lines and colors, but it was obvious they formed the tip of a bird's wing. "It's… really beautiful, actually."

"You can see my tattoo?" Gil was suddenly looking at me with much more interest than before. I saw his eyes dart to my ears and my hands. Those were the first places Fallenkind looked when they met another creature of the shadow world. We were so few and scattered, most of us hidden amongst humans. It was instinct to take note whenever your paths crossed. To learn the species. To gauge the threat.

When Gil found nothing to give me away, he raised his gaze to mine and said, "What are you?"

Strangely enough, the fact that he asked made me like him more. This still didn't mean I believed him, though. I felt my eyes narrow. "You first."

A grin touched Gil's lips. It wasn't quite as mischievous as Laurie's smile, I caught myself thinking. There was something darker about this male. More… hard-edged. The stranger tilted his head, making his gelled hair glint in the fluorescent light. His tone was contemplative as he said, "You know, I'm a gambler. I'll give you three guesses, and if you guess correctly, then I'll tell you. But if you guess wrong, you have to stop talking for the next hour."

I didn't hesitate. I wasn't sure why, considering bargains never went well for me, but my instincts were drawn to Gil. "Deal," I said. Then instantly, "Are you a shapeshifter?"

“Nope.”

“Warlock?”

“Incorrect.”

Shit. Only one more guess left. I withheld the next species I’d been about to say. Why did the stakes feel higher than they actually were? The stillness in the room was so noticeable that it was like a spell, thickening and hovering in the air. I studied the gleam in Gil’s eye and realized I was playing right into his hands. He didn’t expect me to figure it out.

Ignoring the cloud of weariness around my thoughts, I considered Gil like a puzzle, peering at all the pieces.

You can see my tattoos? he’d asked. There was obviously something significant about them. He’d looked at me as if I had surprised him. Not many people could see that ink on his arms, then. What made the ones that did different? Did you need to be a certain… species?

When I first awoke and worried that he’d assault me, Gil had known exactly what I was thinking. Y*ou don’t need to worry about that happening. I’d rather stick my finger in an electrical outlet.* That was what he said. I’d assumed he made a perceptive guess, based on my body language or something in my expression.

My vision tunneled. What if he’d detected my fear with other senses?

“Are you… a Nightmare?” I spoke in hardly more than a whisper. The guess felt right the moment I said it out loud.

Gil was silent. I waited impatiently, but he just kept looking at me with an appraising expression. Doubts began to creep in. I started finding flaws in my theory. *Doesn’t fit*, an inner voice argued. *He would’ve needed to touch you.*

I didn’t know this male in the slightest, but my gut said he wasn’t the kind of person to touch someone while they were unconscious. If he hadn’t touched me, then, maybe he’d evolved. That was possible, wasn’t it? Before I’d asked Cyrus to burn them all away, my own abilities had been growing and changing.

There was also the fact that I didn’t see a being of supreme beauty sitting across from me. Nightmares could see each other’s true faces, but I was human…

Wasn’t I?

The tattoos, I thought. *I can see his tattoos.*

Damn it. What if Belanor was right, and my abilities weren't completely gone? Wouldn't they have resurfaced by now? The Seelie Prince's tortures hadn't been a walk in the park. Surely one of them would've worked, if any of that power had lingered?

I was on the verge of asking more about the tattoos when Gil finally spoke.

"Indeed I am," he said, apparently coming to some sort of decision. My gaze snapped back to the male's face. A hint of trepidation had appeared there, and when I saw that, I felt like an asshole. If Gil was telling the truth, no wonder he hadn't wanted to ask each other questions in the beginning. Being a Nightmare was practically a death sentence, and admitting what we were to a stranger was all but guaranteeing it.

"You weren't kidding about being a gambler," I remarked.

His eyebrows drew together. "How are you shielding your power like that? I could've sworn you were human."

"That," I said, swallowing, "is a long story."

Gil looked around with exaggerated speculation. "I think we've got some time. Unless that recent knocking-me-unconscious incident was just a misunderstanding, and we can come and go as we please?"

I opened my mouth to make an excuse for why I couldn't tell him how I'd ended up here, but nothing came out.

Why not? I thought, considering it. There wasn't anything else to do, seeing as I still didn't trust Gil enough to fall asleep around him. Most of what I'd gone through was public knowledge, or Belanor already knew through his violation of my mind. I wouldn't be giving my tormenter any new information by talking, even if Gil was part of his wicked plans.

And so, in that small white room, I told another Nightmare my story.

I stuck to the basics, reciting the past few weeks of my life as if they were a bulleted list. Meeting Collith at the black market. Accepting the twisted offer he'd made. Undergoing the three trials to win my brother's freedom. Becoming queen and forging a Court bond. Gaining power.

This was the first point in my telling that Gil interrupted. "Pardon me. Did I hear you say that your abilities work during the daytime?" he questioned.

I raised my chin at the skepticism in his tone. "Yes. I'm not sure of the exact moment that changed, but I know it was during my first week at the Unseelie Court."

Gil’s expression was impossible to interpret. After a moment, he made a gesture that I should continue. I hadn’t gotten much further when he cut in again. “Wait, you don’t need to touch the morsels?” the Nightmare demanded.

“Morsels?” I echoed with a bemused smile. “Is that what you call our victims?”

“Victims? Oh, my, you are angsty, aren’t you.” Gil closed his eyes once more, returning to the slumped position he’d been in throughout my narrative. “Back to the matter of physical touch. No Nightmare I know has evolved to the point they no longer need it—I still do. That tells me magic must be involved.”

I wanted to ask him more, but that would bring our conversation into treacherous territory. I could imagine Belanor sitting in a control room somewhere, hanging on to our every word. In response to Gil’s comment, I just made a noncommittal sound, then continued on with the story.

When I got to the part involving Gwyn of the Wild Hunt, my telling became more halting. I spoke of the huntress’s dark predictions for my future. I recounted that shattering night I had succumbed to the darkness inside me, then gone on to slaughter everyone at that black market. Carefully, I explained the decision I’d reached and the subsequent request I’d made of Cyrus Lavender.

I kept out certain details, of course, like what Cyrus really was or anything about Collith’s true ability.

My tale concluded once I reached the present. I told Gil what I knew about Belanor and why he’d taken us.

“Is that his name?” Gil asked, frowning. “I think I might’ve heard his voice while I was out. Asking someone about the ‘chances of survival.’ Didn’t hear the rest, though, and then I woke up in here. With you.”

I wanted to believe him so badly, and I longed to talk to Gil anywhere other than this room. Suddenly I had even more motivation to survive whatever Belanor threw at me. But what were the chances of both of us walking out? There was a reason Belanor had been talking about the chances of survival. And spells, like most things, often required multiple attempts. Maybe the Seelie Prince would keep bleeding us until we ran dry, or maybe each attempt took the life of the Nightmare being used.

There were too many gaps in my knowledge. I’d go insane if I let myself keep thinking about it.

Out loud I just said, “You must’ve gotten on Belanor’s radar somehow. Oh, shit. I should warn you… he might have you branded. The symbol looks Enochian, so I think it’s part of the spell, rather than a super special way to torture me.”

“Jesus,” Gil muttered. He patted his pockets again, more forcefully this time. He looked paler then he had a few minutes ago. His mouth was pinched. It was as if he were finally realizing how much danger we were in. “*Jesus*. You don’t know anything else? Like, will this spell require him to cut my throat open?”

I barely heard him—I was wondering anew at the fact that I’d met another Nightmare. The voice in my head kept insisting I shouldn’t trust him, though. Even if the Nightmare part were true, he could be lying about the rest. If Belanor had ordered Gil to use his abilities on me, this conversation was probably a tactic. When a Nightmare encountered a victim who was a bit more strong-minded, it was easier to exert control over them if there was a connection established between us, no matter how small.

Too bad I didn’t care. Belanor had found a weakness I wasn’t even aware of until now—a desperate need to connect with more of my kind. To learn about our abilities and our history. Becoming human hadn’t changed that.

I’d never called the phone number Dracula gave me. Secretly, part of me had believed it would lead to disappointment. What if this was the only chance I got to speak to a Nightmare besides Damon? What if he knew things my parents hadn’t? There was no way of knowing how old Gil was, since we all aged differently. Maybe he’d been alive much longer than he looked.

While all of these thoughts raced through me, Gil’s head lolled against the wall, facing forward again. He sat there quietly, his lips twisted. I stared at his profile again, as if I could find the answers I longed for by looking at him hard enough. “I thought… I thought my brother and I were the last ones,” I said.

“Oh, you’ve a high opinion of yourself, don’t you?” Gil shifted and let out a sigh. He’d regained control of his fear already, I noted. Nightmares tended to be good at that. “There are still a few of us around, if you know where to look. In small, forgotten pockets of the world.”

“What pockets?” I asked without thinking.

Gil glanced at me sidelong and mimed zipping his lips. Then he held one finger upward. “Can’t spill all my secrets, love. If what you say is true, they’re probably listening to every word of this.”

Startled, I eased backward and rested my spine against the wall. My mind was off again. *Maybe* that’s *Belanor’s next move*, I thought. I’d assumed Gil was the weapon, but maybe he was just a catalyst for this conversation. Belanor was probably hoping we’d reveal something about our species. Especially if he was still trying to undo my mortality. Why settle for one Nightmare when there was potential to have two? Why else would he allow us to talk?

Unless, of course, Gil was full of shit, I reminded myself for the dozenth time. Peeks had warned me Belanor’s next assault would be psychological. But Peeks could have been a liar, too.

I couldn’t trust anyone, not a single person that I’d met here.

My headache was back. Panic crept along the boundaries of my control, searching for weaknesses. I felt like I was on the verge of insanity. Questioning everything, trusting nothing. These dark days with Belanor may not have resurrected my Nightmare abilities, but they *had* revived my determination to survive. To uphold the promise I’d made to Matthew Sworn while I was between life and death.

“What do you do for a living?” I asked, trying to distract myself until the panic passed.

Gil’s eyes flicked upward again. If there really were cameras, though, they’d been well-hidden. “Well, I suppose they already know that bit, considering they snatched me from work. I’m a tattoo artist,” he said.

“Did you do your own?”

Following my gaze, Gil tugged up his sleeve, exposing more of his pale arm and the intricate image that was now part of his skin. “Some of them.”

My breathing slowed as I studied his tattoo more closely, losing myself in it. The entire length of Gil’s arm was covered in a black bird. It looked like a crow or a raven, and I wished I knew the difference between the two. Its round, dark eyes were unfocused, as if it were looking off into the distance. I was curious about the bird’s significance, but Gil didn’t volunteer the information and that felt important, for some reason.

“If we get out of this, I’m definitely hiring you to do my first,” I said eventually.

One corner of Gil’s mouth tilted up. He started readjusting his sleeve, tugging the leather back into place. “Is that right? Any idea what you want?”

The question brought a soft smile to my lips. I’d thought about it before—getting a tattoo. When I was younger, I wanted something that represented my parents. Lately, I’d toyed with the idea of a wolf.

A moment after I mentally drew a howling silhouette that looked an awful lot like Finn’s, I realized the distraction had worked. The rattling sensation in my chest was gone. I took a final, steadying breath, exactly the way my dad taught me to. Deep inhale, hold, long exhale.

When I felt ready to return to the playing board, I refocused on Gil’s face. I was about to attempt asking about the spell on his tattoos again when the door shot open.

Four Guardians entered, and they were in full regalia. Unlike the rough-looking armor at the Unseelie Court, theirs was made of silver. The edges of the metal were lined with vines and flowers.

They wore identical expressions that made them seem empty inside, but there was nothing similar about their beauty. Enormous swords hung at their hips. Somehow, these warriors were more intimidating than the ones at the Unseelie Court. Were the faeries of the Seelie Court… bigger?

Then there was a flash of silver, and I forgot the Guardians as my gaze flew to the doorway.

Belanor came in with a sweep of his red cloak. Beneath this, he’d put on a bright suit of armor, as well. The metal had been molded to his body, but it had generous and dramatic ridges, giving Belanor the appearance of being far more muscular than he actually was. I wanted to make a snide remark and watch his face turn red, but fear had turned my bones to stone.

Belanor didn’t spare me a glance, anyway. He stepped into the small room and loomed over Gil like a comic book villain, resting a gauntlet-covered hand on the hilt of his sword. The Nightmare’s head fell back, landing on the pad behind him with a painful sound. He grinned up at Belanor. “All of this fuss for little old me? I’m touched,” he chirped.

I liked Gil, I decided. Even if he turned out to be a complete fraud, his brand of sarcasm was delightfully similar to mine, and that was difficult to find.

Belanor’s expression darkened like a storm on the horizon. My vicious satisfaction gave way to dread, and I felt my stomach sink. I knew Gil was

about to pay a high price for his flippancy. I glanced between the two males, torn. Part of me desperately wanted to intervene, to help him, but I didn't fully believe Gil's story. Distrust was a shadow over my heart.

Then the window of opportunity closed.

"Take him," the faerie prince said in a voice that rivaled a winter wind.

Gil must've seen the futility of resisting, because he went with them without resistance, still grinning. His leather jacket creaked amongst all the clanking armor. Whatever comment Gil made as they left was blocked by the sound of the door rushing back down. Just like that, I was alone again. The only indication that Gil had been real were the wrinkles he'd left behind on the padded surfaces.

Guilt spread through me like poison. I knew it wasn't completely logical—Belanor was the one responsible for all of this. Not me. Gil would've been taken away no matter what I said.

The room felt even colder, suddenly. I wrapped my arms around my shoulders, but I didn't let myself rock. If I relented control of the anxiety trapped inside my chest, the detonation could be catastrophic. That was exactly what Belanor wanted. I stared at the door and pretended not to hear the noises creeping along the edges of the room like frost.

Wherever they took Gil, it was in a room that was either connected to this one or extremely close to it. I could hear every sound the Nightmare made, and I wondered if that was exactly what Belanor intended. Gil's voice was a low hum, at first, but it gradually built to a string of enraged, desperate shouts. If I had to guess, I'd say he was trying to talk his way out of whatever was about to happen.

Within a few seconds, those shouts became screams.

I bit my lip so hard I tasted blood. Thankfully, it didn't last long. Once silence had reclaimed the dungeons, I lifted my head, trembling, and strained to hear anything else. Had they killed him? No, maybe that had just been the branding, I thought wildly.

More time passed, with still no way to track it. I couldn't focus on counting. My brain felt like it was short-circuiting. Glitching back to the moment they dragged Gil out, jumping forward to those mindless cries. I didn't bother considering sleep. I wasn't tired anymore. Instead, everything was sharper, harsher. Details of the room were almost painful in their clarity. I sat against the wall, legs crossed, staring at the door.

Then more screams ripped through the stillness.

My entire body gave a painful, involuntary jerk, and my eyes widened to the point of pain. These wails were even more agonized than before—I'd never heard anyone make sounds like that, not once in all my years of being a Nightmare. They were so terrible that I clamped my hands over my ears and curled into the tightest ball I could manage.

I still heard it when Gil's voice cut short again.

There was something more final about this silence. A terrified sob almost escaped me. I'd been around death enough times to recognize the subtle signs of its arrival, even as a human. A slight temperature drop. An inexplicable feeling of awareness. After a few seconds, my stomach lurched, and vomit surged up my throat. I fought to keep it down. *It doesn't mean he's dead. It doesn't mean he's dead*, I mentally chanted.

But the silence was loud in my ears, and it sounded like a thousand voices rising up to call me a liar. Gil was dead. Belanor had killed him. I was willing to bet on my life that it was a result of the spell.

My stomach gave another heave of warning. I launched for the toilet, making it just as a surge of vomit exploded from my throat.

For the next few minutes, I spit and gagged over the water, waiting for the nausea to subside before sitting up. Once I felt more clear-headed, I eased away from the padded bowl. Those screams echoed through my skull, the latest addition to a graveyard of haunted memories that existed there.

It was as if someone had been skinning Gil alive. Clawing him open from the inside.

And I vowed, right there and then, to kill myself before I ever let the Seelie Prince attempt his spell on me.

It felt like hours later when the door opened again.

Two Guardians entered carrying Gil between them. They tossed the Nightmare to the padded floor, and he hit it like a ragdoll, as if his body was made of string instead of flesh and bone. The leather jacket was gone, along with his shirt, revealing a body that was too thin and covered in tattoos. Gil let out a low, feeble moan that sent a lightning bolt of urgency through me. *Holy shit, he's alive*.

While the guards took positions on either side of the doorway, I rushed over to him and dropped to my knees. I didn't even consider taking advantage of the open door or wonder if Belanor was coming. There was no blood on Gil's shirt, but I lifted it anyway, revealing a pale, smooth stomach. Every part of him was drenched in sweat. "What's wrong, Gil? What did you do to him?"

This last part I snarled at the faeries. They just stared at the opposite wall, more stoic than The Queen's Guard.

I refocused on Gil and instantly forgot about them. Worried that touching him would cause more pain, my hands hovered over his chest, where he was holding both of his. As though he were trying to staunch a wound. But as I tugged them away, whispering that I needed to see, he could let go, just let go, I saw there was nothing there either. No blood, no cuts, no bruises.

"Tell me what they did to you," I urged. Maybe if I knew that, I'd know how to help him.

But Gil only made a mindless, gurgling sound, and then he went still.

Wait. Did he just stop breathing? I stared at him for a beat, blank with disbelief. Then I began whispering frantically, barely aware of what I was saying, "No. C'mon, Gil, don't do this. *Look at me*."

I pressed my ear against his chest, frantic to hear a heartbeat. When I couldn't detect anything, I didn't trust that my own panic was affecting me, and I shoved my fingers to Gil's narrow throat. I waited, hardly daring to breathe, and… nothing.

Dead. The only other Nightmare I'd met outside of my family was dead.

His eyes were bleeding, I noted dimly, sinking back on my haunches. I'd seen it when they first brought him in, of course, but this was the first chance to think about it. If thinking was what I was doing. Reality had taken on hazy edges again. Slowly, I looked down at my hands. Some of Gil's blood had gotten on me. I turned them over, staring at the red smears on my fingers.

What the hell had Belanor done to him? I mused silently. What kind of spell caused those kinds of sounds?

The first round of screams had been familiar, though. I'd made them myself when Fende held that sizzling piece of metal against my back. Following a numb impulse, I pushed Gil's body slightly to the side, giving

me access to the back of his shoulder. He was hot to the touch, and the skin was smooth and unblemished, save for a smattering of moles. Not that shoulder, then. I moved to his other side and pushed him again, already knowing what I'd find. I still needed to see it for myself.

And there it was—Gil now wore the same brand they'd burned onto me. The burn was so fresh that it must've been done minutes before his death. The skin around the symbol was an angry pink. I swallowed another surge of shock down. Shock and sorrow. I hadn't known Gil, not really, but the Nightmare tattoo artist from London had started growing on me.

I also knew for certain now that he'd been telling the truth about everything. This was too vivid to be a trick or a hallucination.

"Pity." Belanor's voice sliced through the quiet. "He wasn't powerful enough. I knew he wouldn't be, of course, but I'm an optimist at heart. I allowed myself to hope."

"Then I'll allow myself to hope I get the chance to kill you with my bare hands," I said through my teeth, shaking from adrenaline and rage. All the fear I'd felt last time I saw him had crumbled to ash in the wasteland of my hope.

Belanor's gaze fastened to my face. Triumph shone in the depths of his gunmetal eyes. "Oh, good. You cared for him. I suspected you would, if I gave you enough time together. Ruler of the Unseelie Court, and you didn't learn that caring gives you a weakness. No wonder you gave the throne away. Are you angry, Nightmare? Does your brethren's painful death make you long for the power you threw away?"

My hands clenched into trembling fists. I knew, if my power was to return in that moment, I'd use it to tear Belanor's mind into ribbons.

But there was no fear in the faerie's expression. Not a single trace of it. He was truly willing to die, I realized, if it meant that I would regain my abilities. Belanor wasn't just evil, he was a fanatic. I wasn't sure there was any worse combination. Whatever his cause—whatever the reason he needed a Nightmare—Belanor considered it worth the life of a faerie king.

So I did nothing.

"You lose," I said with sweet venom, all of my blind fury rushing into the serene smile I pasted on. Hiding in plain sight. I knew regaining control would be the best way to piss Belanor off; he thrived off reactions and attention. Shoving the knife in deeper, I turned away from him and sat

down against the wall, as if Belanor was nothing to me. His presence, inconsequential.

It didn't bode well for me that his voice remained pleasant. "Fortunately, I've scheduled an entire day's worth of engagements for you, Miss Sworn," he said. "We'll get you sorted out, fear not. Although that's not quite the right thing to say, is it? Fear is exactly what you need."

With those ominous words, Belanor turned and left the room, his cloak flaring behind him like a red smile.

None of the Guardians moved toward Gil's body. I couldn't stop myself from going rigid when it became clear they had no intention of taking it with them. One by one, they went through the door. It slammed down at the same moment I made a ragged sound of distress.

Sealing me inside a padded cell with a corpse.

I started Dad's breathing techniques. *Deep inhale, hold, long exhale*. Calm ebbed back, second by second. I had to keep the emotions locked away. I had to be smart. When it came to Belanor, losing control could literally get me killed. What remained of Gil still rested at my feet, a constant reminder of the fate that awaited if one of Belanor's plans worked. For now, staying human meant staying alive.

As I retreated to my place against the wall, I couldn't stop myself from glancing at Gil's inert form again. The line of blood traveling from his face to the floor had dried, or at least slowed. Not that it mattered. He didn't care.

The silence rang and rang, like some distant phone that no one ever answered. Though it was pointless, I decided to squeeze my eyes shut and block out the sight of Gil's bloody, unseeing ones. The music hadn't come back on, and I was so bleary with shock and exhaustion that sleep actually seemed possible, despite the horrible things that had just happened.

Then Gil lurched upright, gasping.

CHAPTER SIX

My heart beat so hard that it hurt, and I held back a scream.

I could see that Gil was terrified enough—it was in his eyes, which darted around the room, and to me, without recognition. He panted, his chest heaving as if he'd been underwater too long. How was this possible? He'd been dead, I was *sure* of it. Recovering, I hurried over to him and dropped to my knees again. "Holy shit, Gil. Are you okay? Do you remember me?"

I reached for the Nightmare's shoulder without thinking, maybe just to reassure myself this was real. Gil jerked away before my fingers could make contact, snarling, and I caught an unmistakable glimpse of fangs.

After that, it took me less than a second to realize what was happening, and it was all I could do not to recoil. *Oh, fuck.* Fear and grief battled for control over my mind.

His hot skin. When the Guardians brought him back in, and I touched him, Gil had been so hot. I'd been too distracted by everything else happening to think about it. Now I flattened against the opposite wall, trying to get as far away as possible… which wasn't far at all. Gil's eyes tracked every movement, twitching like an insect's wings.

He was a vampire.

Even worse, he was a vampire in transition. It was magic's way of creating a balance, this halfway place. Until he consumed human blood, Gil would be something in between the two species. But he couldn't remain that way for long. The way my father had once explained it, the stress of being in transition eroded the subject's mind and body. The

longest he'd heard of someone surviving in that state was twenty-four hours.

Gil had a choice to make now.

A choice he wasn't exactly thinking about at the moment. I watched his eyes focus on my face first, then lower to the pulse in my throat. Though it was my first instinct to edge away, I sat very, very still. Vampires and Nightmares shared some similarities—fear piqued our interest. It brought out our inner beasts. If I didn't show Gil how terrified I was, he stood a better chance of controlling himself.

Distractions. Distractions helped.

"Why did he do this to you?" I asked tightly. By *he*, I meant Belanor, of course.

To create a member of the bloodsucking undead, the subject had to die with vampire blood in their system. Belanor must've planned all this. It would've been easy to inject Gil with the blood, or put it down his throat while he'd been unconscious.

Sorrow swelled in my chest. The world had lost another Nightmare. No one else might weep or care, but I would. It was a unique pain, being part of an endangered species. Knowing the thing that made you special, a thing you loved even when you hated it, was disappearing from the face of the Earth.

I lowered my voice, intending my next words for Gil's ears alone. "I'll make him pay. *We'll* make him pay."

Nothing. The yellow-haired male didn't speak, didn't move, didn't even blink. We stared at each other. With the bloodstains on his cheeks, Gil looked like a vengeful spirit. I couldn't find any glimmer of humanity in his expression, and I kept searching, not even daring to speak now.

In those tense seconds, I forced myself to consider how far I'd go to survive this fight.

Laurie's voice murmured through my mind, as it seemed to more and more lately. *When you are in a room with a murderer, there are only two kinds of people. One is the killer. The other is the murdered. Which one would you rather be, at any given time?*

"To be clear, if you try to take a single drop of blood from me, I'll fuck you up," I said evenly.

There was another beat of terrible, breathless silence. Then Gil started laughing. He laughed, and laughed, and laughed as if someone had told the

funniest joke he'd ever heard. The sound had a hysterical edge to it that made me press even harder against the wall.

"Nicky was always saying the vamp blood would bite me in the ass," he said at last, shaking his head with an expression that was almost… rueful.

Vamp blood? A faint jolt of surprise vibrated through the depths of terror inside me. The way Gil spoke, it had already been in his system when he was taken. Suddenly I thought of how his eyes had been pink from the moment I'd met him, not just after his brutal murder. For a moment, my curiosity overrode my caution. "You're a V addict?"

Gil smiled humorlessly. "That I am. Partied a little too hard in my younger days, and I developed a taste for it."

And Belanor had known, which was why he'd left Gil's body in the cell after attempting his wretched spell. The Seelie Prince had merely spotted an opportunity. Dead Nightmare? What a tragedy. May as well use Gil's transition to vampirism to terrify the human. If Belanor was lucky, it would turn me into another Nightmare he could use.

Damon was the one who told me about venom addicts. He was always getting invited to parties in the city, before Jassin found him in our garden and whisked him away. My brother had encountered far more Fallen in Denver than I did in Granby. It was there he learned that vampires had the ability to make their bite pleasurable, using a venom in their teeth. Goblins, hunters, and any other person seeking profit bottled and sold that venom.

A Nightmare venom addict sounded like a lethal combination.

More things started making sense, as I thought back. *That* was why Gil had been so calm when I first woke up. Why he hadn't asked many questions or seemed to care about anything.

He'd been *high*.

I should've recognized the signs, considering I lived with Emma Miller, but I was sleep-deprived and traumatized. Details and moments were slipping past me. How long had I been in this godforsaken room? I hadn't thought to ask Belanor or the Guardians. Not that any of them would've answered. But it should've been one of the first things I asked Gil when I woke up.

Now didn't seem like a good time to rectify that. Gil squatted on the other side of the room, his spine shoved so hard against the pad that

indents spread out from all around his body. Every few seconds, his red gaze shot to that flutter in my throat. To make matters even worse, I had to use the toilet. Badly.

I looked at Gil again and tried to assess his control. It seemed like a good sign that he was talking again. His eyes weren't twitching anymore. His fangs were still extended, though. Bad sign.

I refused to die while I was taking a shit on a padded toilet.

Resigning myself to wait, I slid down the wall and sat, letting out a breath as I did so. It was strange how we were in the same positions as when we'd first met. That had only been a few hours ago. Time really flew when you were being tortured.

Gil looked like he'd just come back from war. Shell-shocked. Hungry. Whatever friends or family he had would never see him again. Not the person they'd always known. Belanor had taken so many of my choices from me, but I'd been the one to decide I no longer wanted to be a Nightmare. I took a sliver of comfort from that, ignoring the burst of pain as it slid through my heart.

There was a solution to one of our problems, at least.

Hoping Gil couldn't see any pity in my eyes, I cleared my throat. "Hey, I'm not about to let you take any blood—"

"I haven't touched you, have I?"

"—but you could try *asking* for some."

Gil looked at me as if I'd turned into a chicken. One of the lights flickered overhead. His voice was tight as he replied, "What are you saying? I need you to be really clear."

"Look, I don't know what Belanor is doing, or what he has planned, but you're in it now. He killed you and you need to make a choice. It's not fair. None of this should've happened, and you deserve the chance to grieve what you've lost, but that'll have to wait. Right now, you need to make a choice," I repeated.

When I finished speaking, Gil hung his head, as if the weight of my words was too much. He rubbed his mouth. *Gums are probably sore*, I thought with another rush of apprehension. A rush that made my heart quicken again. I refocused on my breathing in an effort to slow it. Calm. I had to stay calm.

Gil's hand dropped back to his lap, and the sound of it slapping against his other arm was stark. He raised his gaze, and his eyes were even more

bloodshot than before. His face was chalky. “Who the fuck *are* you?” he asked.

The question made me realize that, despite the time we had spent together and all the talking we’d done, I’d never told Gil that detail. My face was the last thing he saw before he died, and he hadn’t even known what to call me.

“My name is Fortuna Sworn.” I said it softly. Giving this stranger my name felt like a gesture of trust, somehow.

“Well, Fortuna Sworn.” Gil paused. The lump in his throat moved. “As tempted as I am to accept your offer, I think your knowledge of vampires has some holes in it. I’m a newborn, which means the instant you open a vein, I’ll go into a bloodrage. I’ve seen it happen, and that shit gave *me* nightmares.”

“Okay. So no blood donations, then.” My tone was deliberately light. I tried not to shift away from Gil, even as I had the thought that he possessed supernatural speed now. He could be on top of me in a blink, tearing my neck open with those shiny new teeth.

Another tense silence filled the room. I stared at the door, but I knew it wouldn’t open again until I was a Nightmare again, Gil was dead, or I was on death’s doorway.

Speaking of Nightmares, I thought wistfully. It was still hard to believe I was sitting near one. And Gil *was* a Nightmare, regardless of death stealing those abilities from him. It hadn’t taken his knowledge. There was so much I wanted to ask him, especially now that I’d gotten a second chance.

I doubted I would get a third. Belanor would still hear everything, but we were running out of time. Frowning, I glanced at Gil from beneath my lashes. When I saw his expression, shame gripped me, and I knew I wouldn’t be asking him any questions. I’d seen the same look on Collith’s face after he was yanked out of Hell. Not only had Gil just had his entire identity as a Nightmare stripped away, but he was facing a choice between eternity as a vampire or death.

My questions could wait.

Looking at him, I ached to give Gil some hope. It was as if he’d had a light before, and Belanor had reached inside and pulled it out.

During one of my many training sessions with Adam, he’d told me there was a code among vampires. A small set of rules, so to speak. One of

those rules addressed newborns, who were never turned away by another vampire or left to their own devices. I didn't know much else about the species—Adam was tight-lipped about them, as he was about most things—but the way he'd talked about that code spoke volumes. My friend wouldn't hesitate to help Gil control the bloodlust.

"If we ever get out of this, you're welcome to come back with me," I said, my voice quiet and firm. Telling him without words that I knew the risk I was taking, and I didn't care. "I know someone that could help you… adjust."

The offer floated between us, but Gil didn't respond. Instead, he started knocking his shoulder against the wall. I wondered if the motion comforted him, somehow. The gentle sound was the only one in the cell as I began to turn my thoughts toward escape. Maybe we could use Gil's bloodlust to our advantage, somehow. The strength of a newborn vampire was certainly a match for a faerie.

As if he heard this, the male raised his head and fixed those red eyes on me. "Have you fully grasped the situation we're in?" he demanded.

Taken aback, I blinked and instantly concentrated on my breathing. *Deep inhale, hold, long exhale*. "I think I have a fairly decent grasp, yes."

"I'm not so sure." Gil's sideways rocking intensified. The sound of his shoulder hitting the pad floated between us. *Thump. Thump. Thump*. He clenched his jaw. His head was still lowered as he said, "There's a knife in the heel of my boot. I bring it to a church every week, and put it in their holy water font. These pointy-eared assholes missed it when they took the rest of my shit. If I go for you, do whatever you need to do."

"You're not going to 'go for me,'" I said instantly. *Thump. Thump. Thump*. "You can beat this, Gil."

The male just kept rocking. All at once, I realized what he was doing—he was rocking to the sound of my heartbeat.

An instant after I made the connection, Gil's motions quickened again. Because my pulse had started going faster. I fought the urge to swallow, knowing he would hear that, too. *Talk to him. Keep him distracted.* "So where did you grow up?" I chirped.

Gil gave me a look that said he knew exactly what I was doing. But he played along. "I was raised by my best mate's family," he answered. *Thump. Thump. Thump*.

I was back on dangerous ground. Not only would it be rude to pry into his past, it could affect his control over the bloodlust. But I had to know. “Why were you raised by them? Why not your parents?”

Thump. Thump. Thump. “They got in a car accident when I was nine. Freak accident.”

His eyes were shuttered as he spoke of his parents, his tone matter-of-fact, making it obvious he didn’t want to talk about them any more. I didn’t like it when people asked about my parents, either.

His eyes are too dark, I noted. He’d also gone still again, sitting against the wall as if he were ready to spring. “What is your best friend’s name?” I asked quickly.

Gil looked at me for a second too long. “Nicholas. His name is Nicholas. I call him Nicky, though. He hates it.”

A small grin touched his lips. When I saw the color return to Gil’s eyes, I started to relax. Talking about Nicky had helped him get a better hold on his humanity. It wouldn’t last long, but maybe just long enough for us to make a plan together. I cleared my throat and ventured, “The only advantages we have right now are—”

The door opened.

Gil and I turned our heads like mirror reflections of each other, both of us tensing. Belanor came through again, surrounded by his Guardians. Screaming started in my head. Whatever happened next was going to be bad, I could feel it. Violence practically crackled in the air.

“I tire of this,” Belanor announced. Before I could summon a cutting response, he crossed the room in an instant, and suddenly my arm was in his hand.

I cried out and tried to wrench free. But I was the weakest I’d ever been, and I was as ineffectual as a child. There was a flash of silver as Belanor produced a small, elegant knife, and then he sliced my skin open.

Time slowed.

Belanor’s hold on me vanished. I could hear my heartbeat without Gil’s help now. It vibrated in my ears like a rumble coming from the ground. I looked up from the cut, open-mouthed, and met Gil’s gaze from across the room. His pupils had dilated to the point where his irises were practically gone, and the eyes that latched on my bleeding arm were black as Hell. Belanor and the Guardians were smears in the background, tall blurs of movement.

The door *whooshed* shut.

Before I could say anything, a newborn vampire launched at me.

I dove to the side, just barely avoiding Gil's swiping fingers.

He snarled and recovered instantly, rushing at me with such speed that I could only react, hitting the pads again. And again. And again. His snarling filled my ears. I couldn't breathe, I was too weak. Then my training finally broke through the fog, and I spun to face Gil. He was coming at me like a bullet, his face twisted in animalistic aggression. I threw up my hand and my knee, aiming both in an unthinking, desperate move. For once, I got lucky. The blow to his throat didn't land, but the one to his groin did.

I didn't count on the force of it sending me to the floor, too. I rolled back to my feet, slower this time, and suddenly I saw my death written on the wall. My blood was *everywhere*. The cut was shallow, but I'd left trails of drops and small splatters. Gil hadn't gotten up yet—he had both hands pressed against his dick, his face twisted in agony. I probably had seconds before the bloodrage overcame his pain.

"You *can* control this, Gil," I told him, speaking loudly so he'd hear me over his moans. I smashed the bottom half of my shirt against the cut to slow the bleeding. "You'll never forgive yourself if you kill me. I won't, either."

The sound of my voice did seem to affect Gil. Or maybe it was just the kick to his balls. Whatever the reason, when he muttered something under his breath and pushed himself up, he looked more like himself again. Well, as much like themselves someone could look when you'd known them less than a day. He dragged himself back to the wall, right where he'd started, and reached for his boot. His fingers moved too quickly to track, but in the next moment, something landed on the cushioned floor between us. Gil didn't look at me, and he held onto his legs as if he were about to blow away.

The object he'd thrown was a small pocketknife. I was still applying pressure to the cut, though. I risked lifting the bunched-up material of my shirt, glancing at the arm beneath. *Good enough.* I wasted no more time

reaching for the knife; I wrapped my fingers around the wooden handle and pulled it slowly towards me. It flicked open with a soft sound.

As I got accustomed to the weight and feel of Gil's weapon, I didn't offer him any optimistic promises. They'd feel like blatant lies now. Instead I remarked, "You were right about one thing."

Gil tossed his head, hard, as if he were trying to shake out a bad thought. Once again, the movement made me think of an insect. "And what's that?"

I held the knife horizontally and aligned the tang pins with the direction of my thumb. Then I sent it into a perfect pinwheel, just as Dad had taught me. "I hadn't fully grasped the situation that we're in. But I get it now," I said.

My voice was mild, matching the calm expression I'd managed. Behind it, though, my mind was churning. Considering every option available to me. I couldn't kill Gil—he was still the only other Nightmare I'd ever met, and we hadn't had enough time. He might be able to answer the questions I'd had for so long. That possibility alone was worth the risk of saving him.

If I wasn't willing to kill Gil, there was only one way to survive these circumstances Belanor had orchestrated. The vampire's concern for my life needed to outweigh his thirst.

How? I thought, watching Gil's leg start to jiggle. He was fighting magic and biology. Even if we'd known each other for years and were deeply in love, or the closest of friends, he'd still end up losing. Brute force wouldn't help me. Ultimately, I concluded, performing another pinwheel with the knife, I needed to fight magic with magic.

What sort of magic would lend me influence over him? Make a newborn care more about my life than the cravings and urges tearing through him?

My mind halted on one thought. *The mating bond.*

It felt like a distant memory now, but during quiet moments, I still caught myself remembering that powerful connection. Over the past few weeks, I'd come up with a dozen ways to describe it. None of them were quite right. Now I found myself trying again.

Being tied to Collith had been like sitting in a dark room, and sharing that room with one person. Even when neither of us were speaking, we

were always… aware of each other. And any time I reached into the dark, he was instantly there, his fingers brushing mine in silent reassurance.

Yes, I thought. That was a good way to describe it.

Emotions filled my throat, making it difficult to swallow. This was usually the part where I stopped thinking about it. I'd shove Collith and all those feelings into some dark, secret place and jump up to seek distractions. I would go for a run, or train with Adam, or clean the house.

But I couldn't do any of those things right now. My mind and body had been weakened in every way, and this time, I wasn't strong enough to deny the truth in my heart.

I missed it. I missed the mating bond, and more than that, I missed Collith.

Despite this, and despite how often I'd thought of it, I couldn't remember the Enochian words my ex had recited that day in the woods. I suspected they were the most important part, considering the only other piece of the spell had been a kiss.

The mating bond was out, then.

I couldn't deny the surge of relief that went through me. The magic between me and Collith had blurred so many lines, and I wasn't capable of trusting anyone to that extent again.

What about a different spell? A different bond? There was only one other that I knew of—the bond that once existed between me and the Unseelie Court. It was the same issue, though. I'd only heard the Tongue perform the spell once, and I didn't have any of the ingredients he'd possessed that day, anyway.

What *did* I have, then? I had a knife… and I had blood. And blood, I'd discovered during my time at the Unseelie Court, always held power. Like the blood oath.

The blood oath. I almost made a sound of excitement. A blood oath wouldn't be enough to keep Gil's fangs out of my neck, but thinking of it was like tossing a match on a puddle of gasoline. My mind brightened.

Kindreth's journals. In one of them, she'd written a story of a witch at the Unseelie Court. A beautiful witch who served Folduin, the head of Viessa's bloodline. The witch targeted faeries at Court, choosing them for their influence, power, and resources. She performed the same spell on each one, binding them to her with the intention of eventually overthrowing King Sylvyre.

Collith's father had discovered what they were doing, of course. The witch was arrested, along with many of the creatures she'd tied to her.

Kindreth had been one of the council members to conduct interrogations.

Lyari's mother hadn't tried to hide her revulsion as she relayed what she'd learned from those conversations. Like the blood oath, an exchange of blood was required for the spell. Like the vows of fealty, the subject had to vocally pledge themselves to the witch, using their true name. After that, she began to chant, and the words were so simple that I could still see them written on the yellowed page. *Allar gono epoh*.

Kindreth believed they were Words, the capitalization obvious even in her scrawl. Whatever that meant—the ancient faerie hadn't supplied a definition, and I'd been too frantic to get through the journal to ask Laurie.

During her investigation, Kindreth had met the creatures under the witch's spell. The way Lyari's mother described it, the bond was different from anything she'd ever encountered before. It wasn't as deeply rooted as the mating bond, or as overwhelming as the Court bond. This was something no less permanent, but far more irreversible. Those were the exact words she'd written. They were also all she'd written. Kindreth never mentioned the nameless spell again.

She did, however, write of what happened to Folduin and his witch.

The witch was found guilty of treason and beheaded by Death Bringer. Her lover was not given the same sentence, of course—Folduin was an original angel, so he got special treatment. But I did find it significant that I'd never met him during all my time underground. After his failed insurrection, he'd stopped appearing, stopped plotting altogether. Viessa herself barely spoke of him. Whatever punishment Sylvyre doled out that day, it had reverberated through the ages, changing Folduin forever.

The witch's victims, Kindreth had added at the end of the passage, grieved for her with pain that seemed genuine and long-lasting. The spell's effects hadn't faded, even after the one who cast it was dead.

I hadn't thought of that story since reading it. During those tense, bleak hours leading up to the events at the tomb, I'd been entirely focused on finding Gwyn's weakness. When I'd encountered the passages of the witch, I hadn't even considered using her spell. The goal had been to entrap or kill Gwyn, not bind her to me for the rest of our lives. That bond probably could have saved me from getting drowned in a frozen creek, but

the prospect had been too revolting. Taking someone's choices, their freedom.

The world of magick is dark, and no one goes into it willingly. Mercy's voice. Her words. Did the fact that I thought of them now mean I was actually considering this?

Yes. Yes, I was. An idea was already half-formed in my head. I didn't know if it would work—realistically, a human performing the spell would probably render it useless—but it was the only way I could think of to get us both out of this alive.

"I have an idea…" I trailed off when Gil's head snapped toward me, and his eyes were black again. His teeth bared in a soundless snarl and his fingers curled, as if there were claws at the end of them. Moving slowly, I rose to one knee and adjusted my hold on the knife. "Gil, listen to me. Just hold on, I have an idea."

He leaped, making sounds that a human throat wasn't capable of.

Everything that followed happened in three seconds. Gil and I were tipping backward, his fingers digging into my rib cage to hold me in place. He didn't see the knife I'd brought up just as he lost control. He landed on it, and his weight, his momentum jammed the blade inside up to the hilt. I was staring directly into Gil's eyes when he registered what had happened; I saw them widen in astonishment and pain. He tipped to the side, his hand slowly going to the knife, as if to confirm that it was really there.

I'd done my best to wound him somewhere nonfatal, and there was no time to worry if I had succeeded—after a moment, Gil turned to me again, his eyes already searching for the vein in my throat. *Damn supernatural healing*, I thought just before I dove on top of him, pushing the knife in even deeper. Gil screamed. His back hit the pads with another hollow sound and his body went slack. For an instant, I worried he was dead. Then I registered that his eyes were open and his hands were reaching for the knife.

I yanked the knife out and slammed it down again, making Gil's entire body jerk. The blade wasn't long enough to impale anything, but I could imagine that pointed tip scraping an organ. I winced at the sound of Gil's gasp. Guilt grew and twined through my own chest like vines.

Stabbing him had been necessary, I told myself firmly, keeping the knife exactly where it was. There was no way I'd be able to do this next part on a struggling, newborn vampire at full strength.

“I’m sorry, Gil,” I said, steeling myself.

Gil looked up at me, and I tried to focus on the pretty brown of his irises, instead of the sea of red all around them. A question formed in those eyes, but Gil would never get the chance to ask it.

Moving with the speed my father and Adam had taught me, I wrenched the knife out of Gil’s gut and used it to slice my arm open a second time, just below the cut Belanor had made. Blood splattered across Gil’s face as I jammed my fingers into the fresh cut, drenching them. Hissing in pain, I buried my fingers into the vampire’s stab wounds next, this time with such ferocity that his blood splattered my face, too.

Gil was wild, bucking and screaming, his eyes and veins bulging with need. I held him down, almost losing my grip twice. He didn’t care about the pain of what I was doing to him—he only wanted the human blood I’d spread everywhere. Again. It was on my hands, the padded floor, our skin, our clothes. The gash I’d made must’ve been deeper than I thought.

“What is your full name?” I shouted, struggling to keep Gil pinned. Thank God he was still weak. I really should’ve thought to ask this earlier.

“*Gilbert Payne*,” came the screamed reply.

“Repeat after me,” I snapped. Before I could go on, Gil wrenched his body to the side, almost unseating me. His thin arms were slick with blood. I swore and grabbed him even harder, resisting the urge to shake him. Instead, I rammed my fingers into his wound deeper. His scream shattered my eardrums. “Say these words exactly, or I’ll rip your heart out right now, damn it!”

His voice was unrecognizable, twisted with pain and reluctant restraint. “*What are the words?*”

“I am Gilbert of the bloodline Payne,” I panted. I jerked back, narrowly missing his head smacking into mine. “I pledge myself to Fortuna Sworn!”

His teeth clacked between words. With every jerk, I lost a little more of my hold on him. “I am… Gilbert of the bloodline Payne. I pledge myself to… Fortuna Sworn.”

I didn’t hesitate. I didn’t think about repercussions or right and wrong—my thoughts were only about survival. I started chanting in Enochian, saying the words exactly as they’d appeared in Kindreth’s journal. My pronunciations were probably atrocious, but so much of magic was

intention and expectation, anyway. “*Allar gono epoh. Allar gono epoh. Allar gono epoh.*”

Gil froze. So did I.

Unlike the night of my coronation, this bond had formed instantly. Not a mating bond, or a Court bond, but something between the two. It didn’t feel like someone sitting in a room with me or a presence at the edge of my subconscious. No, he was in my very heart. Suddenly I understood why there had been no records of it, why monarchs didn’t use it.

Gil was loyal to me now, just as I’d hoped… and I was equally loyal to him.

The thought of someone harming him was abhorrent. In the same way I was willing to die for Damon, or Emma, or Matthew, or Finn, so I was for this stranger. Shaken, I removed my fingers from Gil’s torn flesh and moved back. The pocketknife rested on the floor between us. I was too dazed to pick it up.

I understood, suddenly, how I’d still been connected to the Unseelie Court even after my bond as their queen was broken. That had been the Tongue’s spell. His intentions and incantations. But the entire time I was amongst them, I was weaving one of my own. My blood had soaked the very dirt of that place. They’d spilled their blood for me, too. Somehow, with magic I didn’t fully understand, I had bonded to certain individuals within the Unseelie Court, like Daratrine.

“What did you do?” Gil asked shakily. He pressed against the wall as if I were the monster in this room. His hands were flattened against the floor instead of his wounds, acting like he didn’t even notice them. He stared at me with eyes that were entirely brown. “What did you do?”

My nostrils flared. “I protected myself. You would’ve done the same.”

The vampire shook his blond head, and his expression shifted from horror to bewilderment. “How? You’re not a witch. You shouldn’t have been able to—”

“I drew the magic from our blood. I think.” Dragging myself backward, I slumped against the wall. Even my bones felt tired. “In a similar way to how I was bonded with the Unseelie Court, now you and I are. With your vow of fealty, practically written in blood, it will go against all your instincts to hurt me.”

“You took away my free will,” Gil spat, his eyes flashing.

He was probably right to be furious, but I didn't have the energy to deal with it right now. I closed my eyes. "Don't be so dramatic."

Just as the last word left my mouth, the door opened again. I jerked to attention, forgetting my weariness in an instant, and I saw Gil do the same. Belanor walked inside yet again, followed by the same Guardians as before. Not one of them had a hair out of place or a dull spot on their armor. Looking at them, I had a flash of intuition. *They're all dressed up. They have somewhere to be today.*

An inexplicable sense of dread gripped me.

That dread only worsened when a Guardian spotted the pocketknife. He blurred across the room, grabbed it, and returned to his sovereign's side. Just like that, the knife was nowhere to be seen.

Belanor ignored Gil completely, putting his back to the vampire to focus on my face. His eyes were like molten iron. His color was high and a vein stood out in his forehead. He looked like a child on the verge of a tantrum, I thought.

"Has it occurred to you that all of this could be for nothing?" I drawled, knowing my apparent lack of fear or pain would niggle at Belanor like a beetle through the dirt. "That you're just wasting your time trying to undo what can't be undone?"

"What kind of spell did you just perform on that abomination? And how? Before you answer, you should know that my patience wears thin, Fortuna Sworn," the faerie prince said. There was a warning in his voice.

By *abomination*, I knew he meant Gil. I blinked, pretending to be astonished. "Are you saying this has been you patient?"

Gil made a sound that might've been a laugh. I grinned at him, just to piss off Belanor.

It worked.

His eyes blazed now. He snapped his fingers at the guards, a golden pinkie ring flashing. "Bring her. She'll need to be properly dressed for the Games."

The Games? I glanced at Gil again, hoping he'd explain. But he was frowning, too—he didn't know what Belanor was talking about.

The faerie saw our confusion and smiled. The Guardians had already started moving toward me. I tensed to run, but of course there was nowhere to go. "I promised you a full day, didn't I?" Belanor said, staying

near the door. “Did you think it ended here? Oh, Miss Sworn. You’ve truly been a disappointment… but perhaps my expectations were too high.”

The faeries grabbed onto me with grips like handcuffs. One of them yanked with unnecessary force, nearly pulling my arm out of its socket. Our gazes met, heated with hostility. Maybe I’d killed one of his cousins, or maybe he just loathed humans. Well, the feeling was mutual. “I would love to insult you, but I’m afraid I can’t top what nature has already done,” I told him sweetly.

The male’s eyes narrowed. He raised his fist to strike me, just as Lyari had when we first met.

Gil bellowed.

The sound didn’t seem possible out of that underweight body of his. Two of the Guardians holding me blurred across the room, pinning Gil down with breathtaking efficiency and brutality.

He fought them with the full strength of a newborn, and in that instant, I realized where I was getting my own rush of vitality. *Of course. The bond.* That was also where Gil must’ve gotten his newfound control.

Gil struggled so hard that two more guards left Belanor’s side to intervene. He kept fighting them. Any second now, these empty-eyed faeries would start breaking Gil’s bones to subdue him.

“Stop,” I said. Then, louder, “Gil, stop! I’ll be okay!”

He stared at me, his chest heaving. I could feel Belanor watching us, so I kept everything I felt from my face. But I sent those feelings toward Gil, willing him to keep any surprise from his expression when he sensed it. Sensed the warmth that emanated from my soul to his. The bond was… beautiful, I was surprised to note. I could see it now that I’d deliberately tried to communicate with it. There were tiny lights floating between us, like a cloud of glitter. When I focused on the bond, Gil himself faded, as if he’d stepped back into shadow.

He could see the bond, too. His lips were slightly parted, his eyes dark with awe. His fangs gleamed gold from the magic, as though it were a visceral thing.

Then the Guardians pulled me out of the room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

My shackles jangled like Christmas bells.

I walked blindly. A golden mask had been secured against my face, and over that, someone had put on a blindfold. As Belanor promised, I'd been dressed for the part… whatever that part was. No one had bothered to explain in the hours that had passed since I was separated from Gil.

After they had pulled me out of that blood-stained cell, Belanor walked off in one direction while I was forced down the other. Gil shouted my name as if he'd said it every day. As if we'd been in each other's lives for years instead of hours. The sound echoed off the walls.

Then the door *whooshed* shut behind us.

Quiet pressed in from all sides. I found myself being led through a long, white hallway, with doors evenly spaced and directly across from each other. Not a single sound came from beyond those doors, and none of them had windows to allow glimpses inside. It was like a setting out of a dystopian novel. Somehow, I preferred the cells at the Unseelie Court. At least they were honest about what they were.

I left a trail of blood on the white tiles as two Guardians led me to the very end of the hall, where an elevator stood. The mean-faced one—the male who I'd insulted in the cell—stepped forward to press the button.

Within a moment, we could hear the approach of the elevator. *Beep. Beep. Beep*. The three of us stood there in a stilted silence, keeping our gazes on the closed doors. I considered asking them how they liked working for a psychopath, but I'd already taunted the mean-faced one

today and he tried to beat me for it. I didn’t want to add a broken jaw to my list of problems.

The doors opened, thank God, and our strange company walked in. The inside of the elevator looked extremely similar to the cells, only smaller and without a toilet. This time, it was the other faerie who reached for the screen. A list appeared, and it was short. Five numbers and a series of options in the event of an emergency. The Guardian selected the fourth level and stepped back, fixing his gaze on the wall ahead.

Moving with unexpected smoothness, the elevator climbed one level and stopped. A faint *ding* rippled through the stillness, and then doors opened again.

The faeries wasted no time forcing me forward, the mean-faced one giving me a sharp jab. A flare of temper made me feel hot. Good thing, too, since the fourth level was just as cold as the fifth. I crossed my arms and walked down another corridor, but it felt inaccurate to call it a hallway. These walls, I was surprised to see, were made of concrete. The doors were wooden, with dark grooves and black, rusted handles.

We hadn’t gone more than a few steps when the Guardians stopped at one of those doors. There were no locks or panels on it, but I could hear something on the other side. A strange humming. Anxiety rushed through me. Combined with the blood loss, it was too much, and my vision went slightly hazy as a Guardian opened the door. The hinges let out a throaty moan.

The faerie grabbed hold of me again, and we stepped into a room of chaos.

It hadn’t been humming I’d heard—it was a collection of so many sounds that they all blended together. We were in what looked like a gigantic, underground salon. The concrete space was lit up with spotlights, dangling fluorescents, and harsh lamps placed throughout the work stations. A cacophony of noise rose toward the vast ceiling. Hair dryers, voices, shouts, music. All around the room, standing in front of pillars as if they were part of them like strange and beautiful gargoyles, there were Guardians. Their swords were drawn, which was a message in itself.

With the rough guidance of my escorts, I made my way down the center aisle, taking in every detail that I could. Eavesdropping on any snatch of conversation that reached my ears. But no one said anything revealing—they mentioned makeup brands, hair styles, the weather. The

stations were filled with other terrified-looking people, many of them wearing strange clothing. Some of the males wore nothing more than loincloths, with armor on their arms and legs that looked like it was made of leather. Figures in white worked on them, and they were the ones doing most of the talking.

Eventually we came upon a station that was empty. A single chair rested in the center, and it looked like one of those seats you sat in during a haircut. The Guardian shoved me into it and stepped back slowly, the hardness in his expression speaking volumes. No escape attempts would be tolerated. I clenched my fists and imagined what his whimpers would sound like.

"Okay, let's see what we're working with. Ouch, that arm doesn't look too good." A female wearing one of those white uniforms halted in front of me. She studied my face for a moment before looking down at an iPad. There was a silver nametag pinned to the right side of her chest. BEAUTY TECHNICIAN, the embossed letters read. In smaller text underneath this it said, WEREWOLF.

Strange that the tag should give a species instead of a name. Still feeling some dizziness, I tipped my head back and raised my eyebrows at her. In some ways, the werewolf reminded me of Cora. "Should I bother asking you what all this is for?" I said. Was I slurring my words?

"Everyone here has signed a non-disclosure agreement," the technician said without raising her gaze. Her finger tapped the screen. "I think we'll start with—"

A new voice sliced through the cold. "You're not starting anything yet. I've been commanded to tend to this human immediately."

Iris had arrived, tight-lipped and eyes flashing. The technician nodded quickly, failing to hide the brief widening of her eyes. She was afraid of this witch, I noted with a trickle of unease. Maybe I needed to tread more carefully around Iris… until I got the opportunity to kill her, at least. I hadn't forgotten the catty smile that had curved the witch's lips as she gazed down at my burned body. *I look forward to watching you break.*

She opened her supply bag, and I held onto the armrests of the salon chair as if I were dangling off a cliff. Handling me just as roughly as before, Iris proceeded to disinfect, stitch, and bandage the cuts on my arm. She didn't inject any sort of numbing agent before using the needle on me. I gritted my teeth so I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of gasping.

I didn’t miss the fact that Iris didn’t use magic, which would’ve been faster and cleaner. Was the witch still running on empty, or was she doing it this way out of spite?

Spite, I decided as she tugged hard at the final suture. It was definitely spite.

But the pain didn’t end with Iris.

Once she was done and gone, my arm throbbing, the werewolf returned. She was followed by three other unsmiling technicians. They descended upon me like a horde of zombies, all dressed in white. I was forcefully stripped, washed, waxed, shaved, dressed, braided, and powdered. My two faerie escorts remained nearby, taking no interest in my transformation. One of them muttered something about a bet.

We spent hours in that sleek room. By the time the team was finished, whatever stamina I’d received from Gil had faded. Exhaustion made me feel heavier; even my eyelids seemed weighted. I didn’t fight as the technician fit an intricate mask over my face and arranged my hair around the strap. I did have enough frame of mind to think, *Belanor is worried someone will recognize me.*

There weren’t many who’d been able to see my true face while I was a Nightmare, but anyone who bothered to do an internet search would probably find it. So it was possible that someone in this palace made the connection if they spotted me.

For all his talk of claiming, the prince was making efforts to keep his Court unaware that Fortuna Sworn was in his basement. Maybe it was the reason he’d changed my room, or part of it, at least—my screams couldn’t have gone unnoticed.

Now I was being led down the corridor again, blindfolded but unbound. I knew that wherever we were going, Belanor’s next torture awaited. I wore a top made of leather, the straps secured across my nipples and slightly below them, leaving little else to the imagination. The skirt also didn’t cover anything. It was more of a thong, with a ragged wrap around my hips. Even my feet were bare. I’d worn bikinis in public before, but it had always been my choice. To have that choice taken, too, brought a bitter tang to my mouth. I fought the faerie guards dragging me, despite the futility of it, because I would never stop fighting. Not anymore.

We walked longer than I expected. The Guardians took so many turns that it seemed like a deliberate effort to confuse me. Changes in our

surroundings happened gradually. The sounds we made stopped echoing, and were absorbed by the earth instead. It was as close and chilly as the tunnels at the Unseelie Court, but this place felt damper. I could hear dripping in the distance. The cold, smooth floor beneath my feet became even colder. There were dips and grooves in it—cobblestones, I realized.

Then my escorts were yanking me to a stop again. I could hear something now, a distant noise that I'd only heard once in my life when I'd gone to a concert with Damon.

A cheering crowd.

Was this going to be some kind of… public display? As my mind crept toward panic, the Guardians spoke to each other in Enochian. I'd learned enough to understand most of their exchange, and focusing on the words helped me stay in control.

Will you be all right on your own?

It's a human. What's the worst that could happen?

I didn't hear the sound of retreating footsteps, but the faerie's armor gave him away as he left, clanking softly into the stillness of the tunnel.

The instant I couldn't hear his armor anymore, the remaining Guardian tugged the blindfold off my head. I blinked and peered through the slits of the mask—it was the mean-faced one who had stayed with me. Strangely, he didn't look quite as mean as before.

Disregarding him, I hurried to take stock of my surroundings before my vision had fully adjusted.

Unlike the dungeon or the salon, these tunnels *looked* underground. The walls were rounded and the bricks that formed them were misshapen from age. Flickering torches showed they were discolored, too, and I didn't want to know what the black or green substances were. Ahead of me was a gate, its lattice pattern made of rusting metal. Light streamed through it, pouring onto the cobblestones, and I stood just outside the brightness. Past the gate, I could see a vast open space. The ground was covered in sand. Thick, golden sand, as if there were a beach nearby. There was no sign of the crowd I could hear, but I knew those sounds were real—the walls and ground vibrated.

I dared to step closer to the gate, and in an instant, I found the source of that noise. Fae cheered from seats high above, the writhing mass of them a blur of colors. I stared, dry-mouthed, and finally understood what

was happening. The costumes, the sand, the stands. *She'll need to be properly dressed for the Games*, Belanor had said.

These faeries had recreated the Roman Games. And I was about to fight in them.

"I have a message for you."

The sound of the Guardian's voice made me jump. I looked back at him, frowning. "What—"

"'Tell her to remember what I said right before she killed Jassin.'"

The faerie didn't look at me as he recited the words he'd been given. For a moment, I was utterly confused, and I kept staring at him with a baffled expression. Then it felt like a meteor shot across a dark sky, lighting up the entire world.

Laurie.

I wasn't surprised that he'd made a riddle out of his message. Annoyed, but not surprised. What *had* he told me before I killed Jassin? Laurie was the only one to offer encouragement, I knew that. I tried to remember every detail of that night, envisioning the throne room in all its bizarre, bleak beauty.

I just wanted to say that you're the bravest creature I've ever met.

That was what he'd said as firelight flickered in his silver eyes. At the time, it had been the most sincerity I'd ever seen Laurie display. The words were tainted now, because Collith had said nearly the same thing the night I told him about Oliver.

But why was Laurie reminding me of that interaction just as I was about to step into an arena? Maybe he meant his message to be encouraging, but it had the opposite effect. I stared through the openings in the gate, feeling nauseous with fear. Whatever awaited in that room, Laurie couldn't save me from it. That was what I'd really taken from his message.

I was on my own.

Suddenly I was filled with the overwhelming urge to *run*. I knew I wasn't a coward, I knew I would find the strength to face this. But for a moment or two, I allowed myself to imagine what it would be like to panic. To give in.

Never. I would never give in to Belanor.

Resignation felt like a weight. Not just on my shoulders, but every part of me. I stayed outside the circle of light, breathing slowly and faintly. No

one had seen me. Not yet. I existed within my world where it was safe and quiet. Soon, I would have no choice but to emerge, and the chaos and terror would surround me. For now, I had a place that was my own.

At that moment, I realized I was trying to recreate Oliver's dreamscape.

I was using Dad's breathing techniques when the other Guardian returned. He held a spear in each fist, and he handed one to the faerie that had given me Laurie's message. "Shouldn't I get—" I began.

A roar tore through the air.

My mind went completely blank. What kind of creature would make a sound like *that*?

As if it were a signal, there was a hollow clanging sound and the gate started to rise. Both of the Guardians tensed. From their perches above the arena, the crowd screamed louder.

"If you remove the mask," one of my escorts said, his baritone voice flat and toneless, "you will be shot. If you try to communicate with the patrons, you will be shot. Nod to indicate you understand."

I gave him the finger instead.

The faerie's expression didn't change; it was almost impressive. I faced forward again, half-expecting to feel his spear pierce my back. The crowd kept screaming, and it seemed as if the sound had an edge of impatience to it now. I stayed where I was, even more reluctant to step into that bright light. It was getting harder to breathe. The mask felt tighter. Darker. Against my will, I started remembering all the creative ways Belanor had tortured me these past few days. I thought of the relish in his voice as he'd spoken earlier. *She'll need to be properly dressed for the Games.*

I was absolutely certain this was not a game I wanted to play.

Something hard jabbed into my back. I turned sharply, and the guard I'd flipped off brandished his spear—he'd poked me with the handle, rather than the pointed end. But if he'd had any sort of training, he knew how to twirl that spear quicker than a blink. The other guard held his out, as well, and he wore his mean expression again. Giving me Laurie's message hadn't made us friends, apparently. There would be no getting past either of them. Not while I was human.

The reminder of my weakness sent my heart into a frenzied gallop. I knew I probably had a second, maybe two, before I got jabbed by one of

those spears again. I faced that enormous space and started walking, almost mechanically, as if someone else had occupied my body. The light hit my face, and after being blindfolded for so long, it hurt. The din intensified, if that was possible. I squinted and faltered, wondering what I was doing here. What they expected me to do.

My eyes adjusted quickly, and once again, I found myself taking in new surroundings. The place rivaled the size of a football stadium, or how big I imagined the Colosseum in Rome to be. The stands circled the space on every side. Stretching between the lip of the wall and the ceiling far above, there was the same material used to make chain link fences. Down here, its purpose was to protect the onlookers from whatever happened on the sand.

The only ways in were two gates, standing on opposite ends of the arena. The other one was still closed, while the one I'd come out of remained open. To let the guards through, I saw as they emerged, spears extended. I walked backward to avoid them, glaring at the two males. Their expressions were hard and pitiless as they kept coming, even the one who had passed on Laurie's message. They were herding me, I realized.

Normally, I'd send them to their knees with dark images and twisted hallucinations. My fingers twitched, the gesture as natural as breathing. I lowered my gaze, hating myself for the choice I'd made in yet another moment of recklessness.

That's when I noticed there was something jutting out of the sand. My self-loathing evaporated as adrenaline heated my blood. It was a knife, I realized once we'd drawn closer. The hilt of a knife.

There was no way the fae were unaware of it, which meant it had been left for me. Me, or another person that would be in this arena.

"Bow to the king, human," one of the Guardians called, making my gaze snap up from the weapon.

King? I thought. I followed the male's gaze upward and spotted the box. It was buried within the crowd, its sides adorned with drapes to lend it some elegance. Belanor stood there, flanked by more guards. His gaze met mine for the briefest of instants, then he looked to the side, as if he'd heard something I hadn't. He was too far away to hear anything I said, but I hoped one of the courtiers in that ridiculous box could read lips.

"Did I miss the coronation?" I called back to the Guardian, finally responding to his command. The faerie's nostrils flared, which was answer

enough—Belanor hadn't been crowned yet.

If I'd been waiting for a dramatic opportunity to reveal who I was, this was it. My fingers twitched, tempted to reach for the mask that hid Belanor's naughty secret. But the werewolf had styled my hair around the thick strap, making it nearly impossible to remove without help.

Before the Guardians could jab me with their spears again, the rabble went wild. It only took a few seconds to figure out that their excitement wasn't for me this time. Now that I was adapting to the racket, I could hear individual voices in the stands, calling out bets and demanding a kill.

Everyone's attention seemed aimed in the same direction. They directed their fervor toward the opposite side of the arena, fists thrusting into the air, the chain walls clinking as individuals in the crowd shook it. A chant built among them, an Enochian cry that had the feel of ancient tradition. *"De a teloc! De a teloc!"*

To the death.

The other gate rattled upward. Dread made me slow as I turned.

It came to a stop with a thunderous, clanging sound. The mass of onlookers were still making frantic bets and shouting predictions. I ignored the dire words about me as I waited for my opponent to appear. It was dark inside the tunnel, and I couldn't see anything moving forward. Not yet. I bit my tongue to keep from pleading with the Guardians behind me. *Keep the gate closed. Please.* I glanced toward them and realized I was completely alone in the arena—the faeries must've retreated while I'd been distracted.

The Games had begun.

I swung back to the gate, and I watched with frozen terror as a paw stepped out of the shadows. Claws ground into the sand with casual strength.

"No," I said, as if saying it out loud would make this moment stop.

But it didn't stop. I stared at the hulking shape emerging from the darkness, little by little. When I saw the figure's face, it was as if God had turned down a volume knob, and suddenly the crowd's raucous cheers were quieter. My mind felt like the static-filled screen of an old television. I blinked, willing the face to change, or for all of this to reveal itself as another hallucination. It didn't work.

Finn. It was Finn.

He was halfway between his two forms, but I would recognize him anywhere. Why was my werewolf acting like he hadn't recognized me? I'd witnessed the moment he registered there was another person standing on the sand—the only reaction had been a huffing sound and a slow step closer. I was still wearing the mask, but Finn knew my scent. He should've reacted to it.

As Finn left the tunnel behind, squinting in the harsh spotlights, I couldn't ignore the feeling that something was *wrong*. Not just with Finn's control, or the fact we were about to be pitted against each other, but coming from Finn himself. I couldn't explain it better than that.

Then I remembered one of Peeks's comments. All day long, it had been lingering along the edges of my mind like a bad dream. *I've heard screams coming from one of the other cells.*

Oh, Finn, what did they do to you? I thought, feeling as broken as he probably was.

At the moment, the werewolf was distracted by the crowd, his huge head arched back to see all of them. Like the male fighters I'd seen in the salon, Finn wore only a loincloth and decorative braces on his biceps. His dark, muscular body had been oiled before he had gone over to the wolf. Cords stood out in his neck and arms.

He looked fucking terrifying.

"Finn?" I called, hoping the sound of a familiar voice, or his name, would help my friend settle on a form. Settling on a form would ground him, maybe even undo some of the damage that had been inflicted on his mind.

Those familiar yellow eyes landed on me again, and something about the way they sharpened had my instincts shrieking. Finn and I stared at each other across the arena. After a moment, a glob of drool fell from his mouth and plopped onto the sand. I glanced down at it, everything feeling slow and surreal.

Then, just as I'd feared he would, the werewolf snarled.

The low rumble vibrated through the air. Even though an inner voice kept insisting this was *Finn*, a person who would sooner harm himself than attack me, I couldn't hold back a flinch.

A sudden rush of movement drew my gaze upward. Archers stood at perfectly-distanced intervals within the stands—I hadn't noticed them before because their weapons weren't drawn. But now, every one of them

had arrows notched and ready. To kill Finn, I realized. The moment Belanor's plan worked, and I regained my abilities, his guards would eliminate the werewolf and remove me from this arena. But what if I was killed instead? Maybe Belanor had given his archers instructions to intervene before that could happen.

Or maybe I'd finally pushed him too far.

Another snarl came from the other side of the space, and I snapped to attention. Finn stood on his two hind feet now. Too much like a man, but with none of the reason to go with it. He took a step closer, and even if I couldn't recall what I was supposed to do next, my muscles did.

I squatted into a defensive stance, reaching down at the same time. An instant later, the knife flashed in my hand. Finn's bright eyes darted to it, but they quickly returned to my face. There wasn't even a glimmer of recognition within those depths.

"De a teloc! De a teloc!"

I tried to block out the chant. I tried to put all my focus on the werewolf in front of me. However this played out, I refused to give these assholes a show. Finn deserved better, especially after everything he'd already been through. I deserved better, too, regardless of the dark deeds that had brought me here.

Hoping to end our battle before it could truly begin, I ran at Finn.

Sand flew out from beneath my feet and my heart was like a series of bombs going off. I'd taken him by surprise, and the werewolf was a beat too late in reacting. I darted past and left a swift, deep cut on his leg. Then I slid, coming to a violent stop, and faced Finn with one hand and one knee dug into the sand, while I brought up the knife with my other.

To my dismay, I saw the wound hadn't incapacitated Finn as I thought it would. *Not a holy blade, then.*

Roaring, the massive werewolf dropped and charged.

That had been my only idea, and I needed to buy myself more time. Cutting Finn's Achilles tendons hadn't slowed him down. Would he recover from a knife to the heart? Breathing in short, terrified bursts, I rolled out of his path. Finn checked himself, but it was too late and he slammed into the closed gate. At the same time I heard his body make contact with those iron bars, I scrambled to my feet and ran.

With every frantic step, that grim chant went on, the crowd's shouts so loud it seemed impossible humans couldn't hear them from the streets

above us. I stopped only when I reached the other end of the arena. I whirled to face the werewolf a second time, ordering myself to *Think, Fortuna, think!*

As Finn closed the distance between us, I tore through more ideas and possibilities. Drops of sweat slid down my body and my chest heaved, nearly popping out of the leather bands mashing them down. I didn't care. Didn't care about anything but the wolf thundering toward me in an explosion of flying sand, flashing teeth, and mindless snarls.

I glanced up at that box again, but I was too far to the right, and I couldn't see any of the figures standing there. My mind kept working. I had four seconds before Finn ripped my throat open. Belanor expected me to fight. Or he hoped the horror of battling someone I loved would break me. The only reason he'd provided a small weapon was to make the match long, bloody, and painful.

So I dropped the knife.

A new plan formed that was sloppy and desperate. It was all I had, though. I stared down the werewolf hurtling in my direction, froth streaming from both sides of his mouth. I pretended the crowd didn't exist, and there was no such thing as faerie princes or wicked spells. There was only my friend, who was going to survive this because I'd make sure of it. I lowered into a tense stance and waited for him, my heartbeat filling my ears. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump.*

Just as Finn reached me, I jumped and swung myself up by his massive shoulder.

Once again, the fact that I'd surprised him was the only reason I succeeded. Within an instant, Finn reared. I clamped my thighs against his heaving sides and my hands fisted in his fur. His arms reached back, trying to find purchase on any part of me, but I leaned down and whispered in his ear, "*Please* remember who you are. You're Finn, and I'm Fortuna. We're pack. We don't have to play their game—let's throw the whole damn board in their faces."

The werewolf bellowed. I wasn't sure if my words had agonized or incensed him. I threw myself off Finn's back to dart away, but I was too slow. He spun to confront me, and that great head slammed into mine. I was airborne for a moment before hitting the ground, just barely missing the wall of the pit. My vision blurred. The ground shook with the thunder of Finn's approach. I tried to get up but everything tilted.

I steeled myself for the final blow.

Then faces rose in the darkness. Damon. Matthew. Emma. Cyrus. Bea. I'd told my father that I would live for them, and for myself, too.

For the second time, I forced myself to move just as the werewolf dove. A hot jolt of pain went through me at the same moment I heard the wall explode. I leaped to my feet and spat blood into the sand—Finn's claw must've caught the corner of my mouth as we passed each other. We couldn't keep up this relentless dance for much longer.

Finn has sustained some injuries of his own, I noticed. He'd hit the wall at full momentum, and some of the bricks were now cracked and concaved. The werewolf struggled to rise, his head bent. A long line of blood trailed through the sand. Resentment filled my heart as I watched him. He shouldn't be here, I thought. He should've been safe, at home, with the rest of our family.

The crowd sensed the shift in my mood and screamed even louder.

I glared up at the stands, wishing I could make these horrible creatures scream for a different reason. Something silver glinted in the corner of my eye, and I glanced over automatically.

When I saw who was in that high box, standing next to Belanor, I froze.

Laurie.

The *real* Laurie. He looked more glamorous than I'd ever seen him, wearing a white coat and a dusting of gold along his cheekbones. That infamous silver hair was raked back, secured at the back of his head in either a bun or a braid, I couldn't tell. He gazed down at me with the bored expression of a courtier. I didn't need to be inside his head to know it was an act.

I also knew that the moment I laid eyes on Laurelis Dondarte, an inexplicable surge of relief went through my veins. As if part of me associated him with safety. The thought that everything was going to be okay.

My relief was short-lived.

A dark shape rushed at me—Finn had moved faster than I was prepared for, especially after the blow he'd taken. I barely managed to avoid him this time. A fresh bolt of pain crippled me and I looked down. Four fresh cuts across my stomach bled freely.

There was no new plan or desperate idea, only reactions. The knife was where I'd left it, I noted distantly. Finn was running at me again, hunting me like a wolf chasing a stag. Losing precious seconds, I threw myself across the sand. My desperation was so overwhelming that I grabbed the knife by the wrong end, and the blade sank into my palm. I gasped at another burst of pain.

The crowd's laughter rang in my ears. Guess I'd given them some entertainment, after all. As I lifted my head, a familiar red haze blinded me.

Fury.

Most often, anger was a weakness, an emotion that led to dark choices and regret. But sometimes, it lent strength. Endurance. The right kind of anger could lead to change.

They weren't going to make me a killer again.

I squeezed my eyes shut and dove within myself. When I came to that mental wall Collith had taught me to envision, I didn't falter or hesitate—I shattered through it.

I relived the hunger and the power. I heard the screams and the moans. I remembered the shame. Through every moment, Laurie's voice was there, a hum in the background like an audience on the other side of that red curtain. *Don't you know what strengthens a Nightmare's power? Unleashed fury. Pain. The things bad dreams are made of.*

All of this happened within two to three seconds. Then Finn was there, opening his mouth to rip me in half. *"Finn, stop!"* I cried in true terror, twisting to protect my face.

Acting purely on instinct, I grabbed hold of the werewolf's mind with an ease that was startling, even in the chaos of the moment.

Oh my God, I thought. *Oh my God.*

I was a Nightmare again.

Power sang through my veins, but I didn't stop to marvel at the return of this wondrous feeling. Finn had frozen with his body hovering above mine, his jaw unhinged, one of his clawed hands drawn back to rip my body open. Staring at him over my shoulder, I remained on my stomach, panting into the sand as I learned his secrets as gently as I could while still trying not to sacrifice speed. The knife lay a few feet away, discarded in the sand—I must've dropped it when I wrenched myself around.

There was no time to find memories or learn the reasons for Finn's fears. In seconds, I discovered that he was no longer afraid of Astrid… but the previous werewolf alpha had been replaced by a new figure. When I saw who now stood within the shadows of Finn's nightmares, my being flooded with such incandescent hate that I felt like the sun.

I didn't want to do it. I would've done so many other terrible things to avoid it. I was getting Finn out of this alive, though, and I needed him coherent to do that. I imagined my heart turning to stone as, for the first time in what felt like a small eternity, I gathered someone's fear and made it real before them.

Finn went rigid on top of me. For a disorientating moment, I was in my body and peering out from his eyes, too. Being human and going so long without power had made me clumsy with it. I closed my eyes and concentrated. In the next breath, I opened them again, and I watched Finn face the cruel illusion I'd made to save us both.

Belanor looked down at him with open disdain.

The Seelie Prince was wearing clothes I didn't remember—this was Finn's fear, which meant he must've seen Belanor exactly as he appeared now.

"Regain control of your wolf," the Seelie Prince ordered. It was Belanor's expression, his face, but my words came out of his mouth. "Remember yourself."

And because Finn was afraid, he obeyed.

The sound of crunching bones filled my ears. I pulled my power back, retreating from Finn's mind, and my eyes were burning. If I were to look into a mirror, I knew they'd be red as human blood. Finn heaved on top of me, his weight crushing. But I barely noticed. I barely noticed anything, because my entire existence had shrunken down to one need.

I was… ravenous.

All these vulnerable, unguarded minds around me, just ripe for the plucking. So many fears to reap. My mouth filled with saliva.

No. Stop. Think. I knew there was a reason I should resist. I squeezed my eyes shut again, and after a second, I pictured my family again. Maybe because I'd just been thinking of them a minute ago. *Damon. Matthew. Emma. Cyrus. Bea.*

Finn threw himself to the side, and suddenly I could breathe again.

Feeling more in control, I started forming coherent thoughts. *Deep inhale, hold, long exhale*. When I finally opened my eyes, I immediately searched for Finn. He was within touching distance, panting, pieces of gore lying around him in the sand. Surprisingly, the loincloth had survived the transformation. I watched Finn's features settle into place as he fully returned to his human shape.

It was never a pretty process. A patch of wolf fur, along with the flesh it had been attached to, stuck to Finn's blood-smeared hairline. I grasped it between my thumb and forefinger, delicately peeled it free, and tossed it to the side. The skin beneath it was smooth and unblemished. Finn's eyes met mine, and this time, there was recognition in them. Warmth spread through my chest.

"Hey, there," I said softly.

"Hello, Your Majesty," my werewolf murmured back.

A shout floated down from above, distracting both of us. I looked up. Faces in the stands were getting bored or restless. None of the spectators seemed to realize something had changed, because there was no fear or surprise in their voices. It must've looked strange, Finn just laying on top of me and neither of us doing anything. Most of them were calling for our executions so the Guardians would bring out the next fighters.

I planned to relish in the sight of their greed giving way to shock, then horror.

Finn and I got to our feet. While he absorbed the sight of the stands—he was probably seeing all of this for the first time, since he'd been out of his mind before—I turned toward that colorful box. A quiet calm had draped over me. Those shining figures still stood there, Laurie included. Right now, though, I only had eyes for Belanor.

There was no way my voice would reach him, but he'd be able to see the shape of the words. They were simple ones. "I'm going to kill you," I told the prince.

It was immediately clear that Belanor hadn't figured out what happened, either. I realized that the mask he'd put on me as a means to protect himself would now be the reason he lost his life. Without it, the prince might've seen my face change into the exquisite features of a Nightmare. As it was, Belanor was completely oblivious to the danger. He just sneered down at me now, a familiar promise in his eyes. It was always the look he got when I could expect another round of torment and agony.

That was all the encouragement I needed. I started to raise my arms, an involuntary movement as I mentally reached across the space for Belanor's psyche. I was going to make him wish he'd never been born.

Finn's desperate cry sliced through the chaos, and at the same time his voice sounded, I caught a familiar scent. "Fortuna, behind—"

Then there was nothing.

My first thought, when I opened my eyes to the dreamscape, was that Belanor had drugged me again.

I hadn't seen this place in so long that I'd truly believed it was gone for good. Reawakening the Nightmare within hadn't just pulled the bad things from that inner darkness—it had brought the good things, too.

My second thought was of Finn, and my stomach sank. He was back in reality, subject to Belanor's every sadistic whim.

But I didn't try to wake myself up, in spite of how much I wanted to be at his side. The moments leading up to my arrival here were vivid, and I knew I'd been knocked unconscious. There would be no leaving the dreamscape until I recovered from the hit to my skull.

Resigning myself to hours of feeling powerless and anxious, I turned my attention to the dream world I hadn't seen in weeks. I stood next to the oak tree, where I usually arrived. With one palm resting against its bark, my gaze roamed the distance, automatically searching for a familiar figure. Oliver was gone, I reminded myself. He'd been gone even before I became human.

If I needed further confirmation of his absence, there was the fact that none of Oliver's touches were present. No diamonds in the center of the flowers, no tree bark made of candy, no music with every step I took. It was still beautiful, though. The tall grass bent serenely in a breeze. Beyond the cliffs, that endless sea glittered, shining in hues of pink and orange from the descending sun. Other than the eerie statue standing in the center of it all—Oliver's shadow, which I'd turned to stone with a mere thought—everything in the dreamscape seemed as if none of the past few weeks had ever happened.

They had happened, though. I thought of Finn again, worried what was happening to him while I was unconscious. Belanor wouldn't kill him, not when the werewolf could still be useful to his mission. Right?

"Fortuna?"

It felt like everything inside me stopped at the sound of Oliver's voice. It couldn't be real. This was another hallucination, another impossible fantasy. I turned, slowly, my eyes darting in every direction. Searching for him. I halted when I spotted his silhouette just a few yards away.

Then I was flying.

I ran so hard that my arms pumped as if I were in a race. There were absolutely no thoughts in my head, only need. I saw Oliver brace himself an instant before I was on him.

When his arms came around me, it was like I'd come home.

Emotion swelled in my throat. Neither of us spoke—we simply held each other. God, I'd even missed his *smell*. Like paint and sea.

"Is it really you?" Oliver asked finally, pulling away to see my face. His thumbs brushed my cheeks, and the touch loosened something inside me.

For the first time since that conversation with Viessa in a dank dungeon, I felt like *myself* again. I bit my lip, hoping pain would distract me from another rush of feeling.

"I could ask you the same thing," I countered when I could speak. My voice still wavered.

"I have two more questions first." Oliver's gaze flitted to something behind me. "What the fuck *is* that?"

I turned too quickly, sending a flash of pain through my neck. When I realized Oliver was looking at the statue of himself, I relaxed slightly, letting out a breath. I'd been so focused on him that I hadn't even noticed that pile of warped stone as I ran past. It was just as eerie-looking as it had been my last night in the dreamscape. Oliver's face, twisted into an expression of such hatred it was chilling. Wings spouted from his back, feathered things that might've been as beautiful as an angel's, once, but time and darkness had stolen their fullness and weakened the bones.

The sight of it must've been even stranger to Oliver. He would've had no way of knowing what happened between me and his violent shadow self, since he'd left before that point.

I turned back to him, pressing my palms down harder on his chest, as if adding pressure to Oliver's skin could ease the guilt I knew he was about to feel. "Your shadow came back," I said quietly. "It tried to hurt me. It *did* hurt me. I put my hands on it and turned the entire thing to stone, but I don't know how. In that moment, I just knew that I could."

Questions pooled in the brightness of Oliver's eyes, and I tensed. He noted my reaction—his gaze flicked downward as my muscles locked into place—and something nameless passed through his expression. Before I could identify it, Oliver raked his hair back and heaved a soundless breath, nodding slightly. "Okay, next question. What *happened* to you out there, Fortuna? I was on my way back here, and everything went dark. It felt like…" He shook his head. "It felt like I stopped existing."

"Because you did. So did I, in a way." I uttered a shaky laugh; I was giddy now. Since the day Oliver left, there had been a wound on my heart, aching with every beat. At long last, that ache had diminished into nothing. There was so much to tell him, so much to catch up on. Oh, God, how would he react to the news about Gil? On the plus side, maybe Oliver would have some insights on Belanor and the spell he was trying to do…

It took me another second to notice that I'd received no response—Oliver was silent. His eyebrows had drawn together as he watched me.

My smile faded, and I found myself staring back. He looked different, somehow. We hadn't been apart long, yet Oliver had changed in that time. Maybe it was the way he carried himself, slightly away from me, or the leanness of his face, which made his cheekbones more prominent. As if my breaking his heart had removed what little remained of the boy I'd grown up with. Even his hair was longer—a thick strand of it fell over his ear.

I started to reach up, thinking to push it back. Oliver drew away, the movement barely perceptible, but I saw it. My stomach dropped and heat rushed to my cheeks. Somehow I had let myself forget how things ended. How we'd left things.

I'm done. Being your second choice. Waiting around.

Uncertainty flooded the space between us. Where did we stand now? Did he not even want to be friends anymore?

Regardless of our relationship status, I knew Oliver was waiting for an explanation. I cleared my throat and said at last, trying to sound unaffected, "I found a dragon, and I asked him to use his fire to make me

human. Before you say anything, yes, I should've given it a *lot* more consideration. The process almost killed me, and I ended up in a hospital. That's when the cherubim attacked again. I woke up in the Seelie Court, and Belanor—the new king, or he will be, at least—tortured me until it triggered my Nightmare abilities. And here we are."

The past few weeks had been a little more complex than that, of course, but the tension radiating from Oliver made me eager to finish quickly. As I spoke, I gauged his expression carefully. His lips became thinner and thinner.

I should have considered how endangering my life would affect him, but in the turmoil of discovering Collith's betrayal, I'd only thought about myself. Seeing Oliver's reaction, I realized that it wasn't just Cyrus I owed an apology to.

We sat beneath the oak tree, its leaves rustling softly over our heads. My hands rested limply in the lap of the sundress I always seemed to wear here. Seagulls shrieked from the cliffs, their hungry cries riding a salt-laden breeze.

"I know it's not a good excuse," I ventured, keeping my eyes downcast, "but the day I found out about Collith, I felt like… someone else. The pain made me forget everything that really matters. And I want you to know that, no matter how things are between us, I will never put you at risk again. You deserve to have—"

"Hold on. You think I'm angry because you endangered *me*?" Oliver demanded incredulously, making my head snap up.

"Yes?" I phrased it like a question, giving him a look of complete bewilderment. "We didn't exactly leave things on a good note, Ollie."

"That doesn't mean I stopped loving you. That doesn't mean I don't think of you every goddamn second, you frustrating… infuriating…" A muscle worked in Oliver's jaw. He looked away, his color high and his eyes blazing. When he refocused on me again, several seconds later, he'd made a visible effort to calm. "The next time you feel like gambling with your life, come talk to me. Please."

I heard the softening in his voice, and the lump of ice in my chest thawed further. *Don't ever leave me again*, I wanted to say. But I still didn't know where we stood, or how we should act toward each other. Instead I asked, "Earlier, did you say you were coming *back* just before the dreamscape went dark? But why? The last time we spoke…"

Oliver's eyes darkened. I instantly regretted bringing it up when the glimpse of my best friend faded, and the cold stranger looked back at me again. Now I knew that he wasn't punishing me, or angry that I'd chosen Collith. Oliver was just protecting himself, as any person would when they needed to move on from something. Or someone.

Suddenly I was very, very absorbed in taking the petals off a small wildflower.

This time, Oliver was the one to end the silence. "I was coming back to tell you about a place I found," he said.

My eyebrows furrowed. A place? Inside the small world we'd spent our entire childhoods running, climbing, and swimming through? At that moment, I realized I'd never given much thought to what lay beyond our seaside nook. It had simply never interested me. My voice was unintentionally wary as I asked, "What do you mean?"

Oliver's gaze shifted, and he peered at the horizon as if he saw something there I didn't. He sat with one wrist resting atop his knee. "I've been exploring the dreamscape," he answered finally. "I went farther than I've ever gone before. There's something I think you should see—that's why I came back."

Why was he being so vague? I tried not to let my impatience show. "What is it?"

Oliver turned back to me, still hesitating. "I'm not sure I can answer that, actually."

"Let's go, then."

He glanced toward the sun. "If we leave now, we might be able to get there by tomorrow morning."

Tomorrow morning? Frowning, I made a vague gesture between us. "Can't you just… snap your fingers, and get us there in a millisecond?"

To my surprise, Oliver shook his head. Strands of his hair caught the sunlight, flashing like faded gold. "It seems those days are behind us. My abilities have been changing just as much as yours," he said.

As I listened to his words, fear took root inside me—changes in the dreamscape were never good. My mind went back, remembering the night I'd been bitten by a butterfly. Butterflies couldn't bite, but in the dreamscape, details like that didn't matter. It had been one of the first signs of a disturbance in our perfect world of pretend. Signs I'd ignored.

“Do you know why?” I asked bluntly. I was tired of making the same mistakes. No more pretending or being afraid.

I waited for him to evade or dodge the question, as he had before, along with every other male in my life. But apparently Oliver was tired of being afraid, too.

“It started when I split from my shadow self,” he told me, keeping his eyes on his hands. “I saw how much I was hurting you, and I hated it. I kept thinking of how I wanted to be rid of the darkness I always felt inside me. Jealousy, anger, fear. I didn’t know that wanting something in a metaphorical sense would make it literal. The disappearance of my paintings? Your bad dreams slipping past me? Those were effects of the separation. They probably would’ve stopped there, but then I left. I wanted to have an identity outside of you.”

Even now, he wouldn’t turn my way. He pulled some blades of grass from the ground beside him. One by one, he released them into the breeze. I watched them go as he continued, “More things started changing. It didn’t take me long to figure out what was really happening—the more I discover my sense of self, the more I become someone beyond what you created me to be, the less I can control the dreamscape. Now this place actually follows the orders of time, and I can’t manifest things with a single thought.”

“Because it’s me,” I said. “The dreamscape is me. And you’re not part of me anymore.”

Saying the truth out loud made something between us shift. The sorrow and pain were still there, but now there was a sense of… awareness. A feeling I’d never experienced before around Oliver. Unnerved, I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear and squinted toward the setting sun again. I felt his gaze linger on me for another moment before he turned his head, too.

As we sat there, I allowed my thoughts to wander. All of this had started because I’d met Collith. Everything about my life had intensified, including Oliver. There I’d been, thinking of him less and less, and there he’d been, trying to evolve past the make-believe childhood sweetheart I’d created.

Magic always sought a balance. And it *was* magic that had caused the disruptions in this seemingly imagined world—I could no longer deny the dreamscape was tied to the Nightmare part of me, in some way.

Whatever that meant for Oliver, though, I had no idea. Telling him anything would only create false hope. For both of us.

I'd just finished the thought when my body began to lighten. *Shit.*

"Oliver," I said, lifting my head.

Oliver looked over and realized what was happening. His expression didn't change. "Already?" he asked.

I tried to answer, but it was too late.

I woke up.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Oh, goody. You're alive." Gil's face hovered over mine, so close that I could make out flecks of amber in his brown eyes.

Once the vampire saw I was awake, he leaned back. Despite the casual way he'd spoken, there was real worry floating between us.

"I seem to be," I said, struggling to put Oliver from my mind. "Alive and surprisingly… fine."

It was the truth. I sat up, noting that the mask was gone and I had been returned to our cell. Compared to the dank arena I'd just fought Finn in, this room felt downright cozy. I'd also been cared for while I was unconscious. In place of that horrible leather costume, I wore a fresh set of scrubs. Every injury on my body, including the ones I'd sustained in the arena with Finn, were gone. Even the blood smears had been washed away.

Belanor must've ordered Iris to use her magic, which could only be a bad thing—he tended to like me at full strength when he started a new torture.

But Laurie was here now, I remembered in a comet-bright burst of excitement. It was only a matter of time before he found us down here. And Laurie always had a plan.

A plan that I'd bet didn't include Finn.

"How long was I out?" I grabbed Gil's arm in my urgency, fingers biting deep into his skin. There was so much to process. Holy shit, I was a Nightmare again. "Where did they take the werewolf? And how do I look to you? I mean, is my face different?"

The vampire went still, probably reacting to my proximity. His fangs were out, and the sight of them answered my next question on whether

he'd fed. I let go quickly, but I didn't look away. Not when Gil's answers were so important. "They—" he started.

We both tensed at the sound of the footsteps in the hall. The door shot up with a hissing sound, and Gil's shoulder bumped mine as he shifted closer.

Fende entered first. The instant I saw him, my pulse was off like a frightened hare. He was wearing his helmet again, and I wondered if there was a Scary Faerie Handbook somewhere that suggested they should keep their faces hidden at all times. *Better chances of terrifying your victims,* the author had probably observed.

Focus, Fortuna. I was letting my fear take control. I took it back as Fende was followed inside by Belanor and two Guardians.

"Well, look what Tinkerbell dragged in," Gil said, tilting his head toward mine as if we were conspirators.

This was the part where I said something equally clever or biting. But I was having trouble paying attention, because I'd noticed there were handcuffs on the wall across from us. This wasn't the same cell we were in before, I thought as my breathing went shallow. Why had they moved us? Why did they need handcuffs?

Shit, my face. The mask was gone. Belanor would see me and know that the Games had worked.

I looked back at Belanor, trying to draw my power close. Now that I wasn't in the heat of the moment, I was slow and fumbling as I got used to the feel of it again. That was when I realized the Guardian next to him was Peeks.

Son of a bitch. I glared at the red-haired faerie in recognition. *He* was the one who'd stopped me from shredding every mind in that arena. It was his scent that gave him away. Now that I had my abilities back, my senses were better than the average human's, and I knew I was right.

Peeks had called himself my friend. Why did he help me survive against Belanor that day, only to get in my way when escape was within sight?

"What do you fear, little Nightmare?" the Seelie Prince asked by way of greeting, drawing my gaze back to him. More time must've passed than I realized, because Belanor had changed clothes since we last saw each other—this looked like something he'd wear to dinner. A black jacket, pressed slacks, and shining dress shoes.

His question finally registered. It occurred to me, then, that Laurie's twin hadn't noticed any changes in me. He really didn't know he'd been right all along. He couldn't see that his vile methods worked. Peeks had swung his spear at my head before I could display the full return of my power, and Belanor probably explained Finn's sudden show of restraint as a result of whatever I'd said in the werewolf's ear.

As for how my Nightmare abilities weren't influencing the face he saw, for whatever reason, my true face must've been Belanor's idea of beauty. Thankfully, no other Guardians had come into the room with him, and if Fende had noticed anything different about my appearance, he wasn't saying anything.

My thoughts moved quickly. I could use this to my advantage—the longer I kept my abilities hidden, the longer it would delay the mysterious spell Belanor was so desperate to complete. All I knew was that it was a spell he'd killed for. A spell he'd sacrifice anything to see its success.

"Not a Nightmare anymore," I said at last, wincing to keep up the pretense.

"Something which I still hope to remedy." With that, Belanor turned.

A fourth faerie came into the room, and the door closed behind him.

When I realized we'd never met before, my runaway heart slowed, but not by much. Whatever face he saw, this stranger wouldn't know it was the illusion of a Nightmare… as long as he didn't know what the real Fortuna Sworn looked like.

He reminded me of the beautiful, dark-haired warrior that rode with Gwyn in the Wild Hunt. His skin wasn't as tanned, though, and there was no bulge of muscle beneath his well-tailored clothes. The faerie's hair was overlong, falling to his shoulders in strands of darkest midnight. His eyes were a blue that rivaled Oliver's.

There were also ligature marks around his wrists and across his throat.

"This is Lord Vulen of the bloodline Ryllae. He just returned to Court an hour ago," Belanor said.

The first name snagged on my memory like a sweater caught on a nail. So *this* was the infamous Vulen. He was the faerie Belanor had screeched for after one of the occasions I'd pushed him too far. *We haven't been able to reach him,* the Guardian said.

I tried to smile at Vulen, but I suspected it looked more like a grimace. "Pleased to make your acquaintance," was all I said.

The newcomer gave no reply. I darted a glance at Belanor, and I didn't like his smile. Before I could come up with an adequate insult, the Seelie Prince asked, "Have you guessed it yet, Fortuna Sworn? No? I'll take pity on you, then. I've brought Lord Ryllae here because he's a telepath. Not quite a Nightmare, but just as effective. Most of the time, at least. You may begin."

The order was directed at Vulen. My terror exploded like fireworks, lighting up the bond between me and Gil.

"Fuck that," he snarled. Without another word, he crossed the room in a blur, aiming for Belanor. I only had time to open my mouth, about to shout Gil's name, before Peeks and Fende intervened. Watching them reminded me how deadly faeries truly were. Even Peeks, in spite of his size. Within seconds, they'd overpowered Gil and injected him with a clear liquid. He fought them with his face mashed into the padded floor.

*W*hen tremors wracked Gil's wiry body, I realized the clear liquid must've been holy water. The vampire's mouth filled with a line of froth as the Guardians dragged him to the edge of the room, away from their prince.

My fear burned to ashes beneath a blaze of fury. I was contemplating whether or not to reveal my powers and obliterate them all when Vulen focused on me.

Anticipating a painful assault against my mental walls, I went rigid and instinctively wiped my mind clear of every single thought, including the ones necessary to get us out of this. Telepaths could only hear what you were thinking at that moment. I needed to keep my mind blank.

Belanor dared to step closer. "Let's try this again. I said, what do you *fear*, Nightmare?"

Don't think. Don't think. Vulen didn't close his eyes, as I often caught myself doing when I entered someone's head. He just… looked at me. Another second passed, but nothing happened. I glanced worriedly toward Gil, who'd started regaining his motor functions back. His fingers kept twitching, as if he wanted to swing a fist at Belanor's head. I wouldn't mind having a go at it myself.

Why wasn't Vulen *doing* anything? My gaze swung back to him, and this time I didn't look away from the telepath's beautiful, sharp-edged face. *Don't think. Don't think.*

"What do you see?" Belanor demanded.

The telepath didn’t answer. Several seconds passed, and a satisfied smile started to hover at the corners of my lips. Vulen obviously hadn’t been able to get through. It meant that Belanor wouldn’t be able to use him against me.

My smile vanished when Vulen murmured, his voice like velvet midnight, “It’s the Witching Hour. She’s pressed up against a tree—”

“Please, don’t tell him.” I spoke so quietly that Vulen fell silent to hear me. Surprise flickered in his eyes; he must’ve seen that my request was sincere.

Belanor snapped his fingers. “Keep going.”

Once again, Vulen didn’t acknowledge him. We kept staring at each other, and it felt like my heart was in my throat. Suddenly I was furious at Lyari, and Nym, and Sorcha, and every other faerie who’d made me think it was possible to expect more from their kind. But when the seconds ticked by and Vulen didn’t try to get into my head, I couldn’t help myself. It felt as though something inside me had unfurled, like sunlight coaxing a flower to open. Hope. *Maybe Vulen is one of the good ones.*

The faerie’s throat moved. His face remained carefully expressionless, though. “She’s getting fucked by a human. He’s wearing a police uniform,” he said finally.

No.

I was mute with shock. Belanor studied me, his lips twisted in thought. “How interesting. Fende, secure her. The vampire, as well—I want him to watch.”

Not a moment after Belanor spoke the words, his armored faerie came at me like a freight train. My head smacked against the wall. Despite the thick pads, the violent ricochet sent a jolt of pain through me. I was too stunned to fight back as Fende seized my wrists and fit them into one set of the padded cuffs. The Guardians were doing the same to Gil with the other set.

Now that I was restrained, Belanor moved closer. Colorful spots filled my vision, but I still saw him reach for the button on his pants. With slow horror, I realized what he intended.

Belanor was going to recreate the night at the crossroads.

The night that I still couldn’t let myself fully think about, or I would lose all control and become the very thing Gwyn predicted.

“Don’t. Please,” I whispered past the white-hot throbbing in my skull. I could feel Gil’s rage and fear, not just through the bond, but all around us. I forced myself to look up at Belanor.

The Seelie Prince’s eyes glittered. Under the harsh lights, the melted side of his face stood out in stark detail. He stopped in front of me, standing so close that I could smell the woodsy shampoo he’d recently used. His gaze roved over my face, starting from my hairline down to my chin. The way Belanor’s lips curled made it clear he liked what he saw. “Now you beg,” he remarked. “Might we finally be getting somewhere?”

Another one of his rhetorical questions, because he reached for me. I heard Gil make a desperate sound as Belanor’s palms skimmed down my sides and then tugged at the drawstring pants I was wearing. The room tilted, my stomach clenched, and for a wild moment I thought I was going to vomit. Panic buzzed in my ears. Belanor said something, the words a meaningless hum.

My mind had gone to that place. That quiet, safe place, where the sky was so blue and the breeze smelled like open water. And there, off in the distance, a shining figure. His was the voice that I heard, speaking my name with a husky edge I knew better than any other sound. *Just remember one thing, okay? You’re Fortuna Sworn, baby.*

Suddenly the buzzing stopped. The room realigned itself. In a movement so abrupt that Belanor didn’t see it coming, I jerked my head back for momentum and slammed it into his face.

More pain shuddered through my skull, but it was worth it. God, it was worth it. After a moment, I managed to peer upwards again, wanting to see Belanor’s face. But he stood in the center of the room now, a safe distance from me. Or so he thought. He cupped his face, shielding the damage from view. I could still see blue blood dripping off his chin. In that instant, Belanor was the picture of his creepy cousin, Claude, after I’d punched *him* in the face.

“No, don’t,” Belanor hissed when Fende took a menacing step toward me. “She’s *mine*.”

The big faerie stopped. No words came out of that helmet, but his silence felt wrathful, somehow. Gil shifted beside me, grunting, which seemed like a good sign—the holy water was leaving his system. I had to buy him time. So I raised both eyebrows at Fende and said, “You know, I’ve been dying to ask. Why do you hide your face? Are you *that* ugly?”

“I’m going to skin you alive,” Belanor said. His tone was pleasant again, conversational, as if I’d just offered him a cup of tea.

I felt blood run into my own teeth as I grinned. Hitting him must’ve injured me, too. “Try it. I’ll wear *your* skin as a cape when I walk out of here, because killing you will be an act of fucking heroism.”

“Oh, Miss Sworn. I honestly can’t decide if I loathe you or admire you, but I think I finally understand what has my dear brother so riled up.” The prince’s eyes gleamed. His head swiveled to the side and he said to Peeks, “Leave us. No, Vulen, Fende, not you—just the runt. Go to the control room and turn off the camera for this cell, Sarwraek.”

Peeks didn’t even glance my way. He obeyed instantly, and the door rushed open. I caught a glimpse of the hallway. Freedom. It was the motivation I needed to turn my thoughts back to survival. Belanor came close again, standing just far enough that I wouldn’t be able to head butt him again. Vulen and Fende stayed where they were, the latter a hulking presence that oozed violence.

Ignoring him, I met Belanor’s gaze and gave him another smile, this one close-lipped and vicious. “You made a mistake, Belanor.”

I deliberately addressed him without any royal title. Taking it as the insult I’d meant it to be, the faerie’s cheeks reddened.

“And what’s that?” he asked. His voice was thick with the threat of what he thought was coming.

Fresh adrenaline coursed through my veins. “Assuming I need to be a Nightmare to kick your pathetic, miserable ass.”

The last word had barely left my mouth when I moved again.

I knew I’d only have one shot at this.

I wrapped my legs around Belanor’s waist and wrenched my entire body as hard as I could. He dropped to the floor, exactly as I’d hoped he would. I didn’t hesitate before stomping on his head, putting every pound of weight and all the strength of a Nightmare into the blow. I felt the crunch of bone at the same moment Belanor screamed. I didn’t look down or let him recover. Blood splattered all over my shoe as I stomped again, letting out a feral scream of my own.

The sounds coming from Belanor’s throat cut short. Besides the ringing in my ears, the room was utterly silent.

Breathing hard, I lifted my head to confront the other faeries in the room. Vulen was gone—I had a vague memory of hearing the door open

again while I'd been stomping on Belanor—but Fende was still standing near the wall. It was the first time I'd really looked at him head on. Through two small holes in his helmet, I could see his eyes, and they were black with rage. His huge, mail-covered fists clenched. In that instant, I could see how my death would play out. It was going to be much bloodier than what I'd just done to Belanor's face.

"Fortuna," Gil croaked. A helpless sound. He knew what was coming, too. What he didn't know was that I'd gotten my powers back. With Belanor incapacitated, I was officially getting us out of here, and I'd use Fende to do it.

Oblivious to what was about to hit him, the armored giant stormed toward me.

He hadn't taken more than three steps when his throat exploded.

More dark blood splattered across the floor. Fende's body toppled forward, revealing the figure that must've come up behind him.

Laurie flashed his impish grin at me. Light shone from the open doorway behind him, illuminating his outline as if he were an angel or a god. Well, if gods wore three-piece suits and their hair was artfully gelled. There was something in Laurie's fist, long and thin, misshapen and dripping. After another moment, comprehension dawned—it was part of Fende's spine.

"I've been wanting to do that for years," Laurie said casually. He let the spine roll off his palm and fall onto the floor with a wet sound. After that, he produced a handkerchief and began wiping his hands. "Are you ready, Firecracker? We need to make haste."

"You're late," I rasped.

Laurie glanced down at his unconscious brother. He stepped over him gingerly, his nose wrinkling. "I had hoped to play the part of your knight in shining armor, but as always, Your Majesty, you've surprised me. Are you wearing *scrubs*?"

He started undoing the straps holding me against the wall, and I was so relieved that I didn't answer, sensing that I might sob instead. It felt like there was one lodged in my throat, just waiting for its chance to escape. As soon as the second cuff opened, I hurried away from the wall. I needed to put distance between me and what had just happened with Belanor.

"And who is this? Should I kill him?"

Rubbing my wrists, I followed Laurie's gaze to Gil, who I'd completely forgotten about during the last adrenaline-fueled seconds. He still hung against the wall, swaying from the injection of holy water. "Absolutely not," I said firmly, rushing to him. "This is Gil. He was kidnapped by Belanor, too. Gil, meet Prince Laurelis Dondarte of the Seelie Court. You can trust him—he's a friend."

I glanced at Laurie over my shoulder. He looked back at me with a strange expression. I frowned, worried that he was thinking about killing Gil anyway. I got the vampire free of the handcuffs and caught him before he fell. He found his footing, and the weight around my shoulders eased.

"Can you walk?" I asked.

Gil just nodded, and I tried not to seem skeptical. What if the holy water was killing him? He had already been weak from leaving the transition incomplete. All things considered, it was impressive he was even conscious right now.

One thing at a time. Adrenaline was still thrashing through my veins like storm-tossed waves, making my thoughts come fast and hard. First thing, get out of this palace. Second thing, find a Door, like the entrance at the Unseelie Court.

It was another thing I'd learned from Kindreth's journals—that entrance was a spell, and each one represented a life. The life of the witch that had cast it, however many hundreds of years ago. It was one of the ingredients necessary for such long-lasting magic. The final ingredient? A single thought.

The trick is to expect more, Collith had said in my ear the first time we arrived at that rocky outcropping in the earth. There were hundreds of them all over the planet. When Collith had said there were entries to his Court everywhere, he'd been referring to the Doors. But they didn't just lead to that faerie den beneath the ground. They could take the user any place in the world, or to the Door closest to it, at least. Why had Collith been so vague about the true nature of the spell?

Because he was Collith, and keeping secrets was his speciality.

I started to ask Laurie about the nearest Door, and where Finn was being kept, but he'd already strode out of the cell. With Gil struggling beside me, I skirted around Belanor and Fende's bodies. I eyed each one in passing, alert for any movement. Faeries were immortal, with a preternatural healing ability; it was possible one or both of them would

recover from this. I wanted to ask Laurie about this, too, but there was an urgency in the air that kept me silent, my grip on Gil too tight.

As we entered the bright hallway, Laurie didn't offer to take Gil. Knowing him, he'd probably learned everything about my time with Belanor before stepping foot in that cell. If that was the case, Laurie was aware that Gil's grasp on the bloodlust loosened with every second. I could feel faint sensations from the bond—did Laurie know about *that*, too?—and the holy water had only worsened the vampire's need for blood.

There was no sign of Peeks, Vulen, or the other Guardians that had been about to stand by and listen to Belanor rape me. *Pity*, I thought. I would've loved the chance to make them rethink some of their life choices.

An eerie silence coiled in the air. The three of us rushed past the rows of doors, and I kept my gaze directed forward—I didn't want to think about all the people I wasn't saving in order to save myself and the ones that I cared about. Laurie's behavior was indication enough of how little time we had. I didn't know what would happen once we ran out of it, and hopefully I never found out. If I used my powers to take on every creature in this palace, innocents could get hurt. Including the people I was trying to protect.

Up ahead, there was someone waiting in front of the elevator. We got closer and I saw that it was the mean-faced Guardian who'd given me Laurie's message before the Games.

"The camera feeds will only be disrupted for two minutes," he said tersely to Laurie, completely ignoring me and Gil. "The override for the elevator is less than that. Let's go."

I swallowed a dozen questions and adjusted Gil's arm so it wasn't pulling my hair. "I think I got it now," he said, leaning away to test his full weight.

"You sure?"

"We don't have time for this," the Guardian said tightly.

Painfully aware of Gil's ever-increasing hunger, I didn't snap back. My gaze lingered on the vampire's face before I finally let go. The four of us got onto the elevator.

The Guardian jabbed the screen with his thumb. Watching him, it was obvious that he was risking a lot by helping us. The tension he exuded was practically a thrum beneath his skin.

As usual, Laurie read my mind. “I owe you one, Morelli,” he said as we started climbing.

His accomplice didn’t look away from the changing numbers on the screen. “I like cars. Red ones.”

Laurie looked at the numbers, too. He was grinning. “We’ll talk.”

A *ding* sounded, and the elevator doors opened. I tensed, wary of what would be on the other side. My shoulders slumped when I saw the empty hallway. We were back at the palace, above the ground where everything was grand and gilded. Long tables stood along this hallway, each one holding up large vases of real flowers. Their fragrance was subtle but sweet.

All of it was just a pretty distraction from the rotted core below.

Our small group stepped into the open, Morelli included. Gil looked around with faint surprise. He hadn’t seen this part of the Seelie Court, I remembered. Belanor had brought him straight to the cells.

The elevator doors had just closed behind us when a sound drifted down the hallway.

“What’s that?” I whispered, instinctively stepping closer to Laurie.

He shifted, too, and his chest brushed against my back. “That,” he said, “would be the Royal Guard.”

We ran.

The faeries took the lead, veering down a hallway to the right. Laurie didn’t need to tell us to soften our footsteps, and I winced with every squeak my bloodstained shoes made on the tiled floor. Halfway down the hallway, there was a cluster of doors tucked out of sight. Laurie yanked me into the pocket of space. Morelli and Gil followed, the latter looking ashen.

“Why—” I started.

Laurie spoke without looking at me; he was listening for the guards. “You just potentially killed the future King of the Seelie Court. Even if the cameras were turned off by that point, your scent will be all over him. Or, if Belanor recovers, he’ll have grounds to execute you.”

“He won’t execute me,” I said shortly. “He wants me alive. I’ll summon Lyari and we can fight our way—”

“She can’t sift onto palace grounds,” Laurie cut in, already shaking his head. I scowled at the second interruption. “Not without starting a war between the two Courts. She’s had no official invitation from the king or queen. Even if we did have Lyari, the Royal Guard are too many. Brute force isn’t the way. Not this time.”

“They’ve passed,” Morelli muttered. “We need to keep moving.”

Laurie nodded, stepping out of our temporary shelter, and we ran again.

Night hovered outside of every window I saw, but there was no hint of moon or stars. As if the sky itself had tucked itself behind a thick layer of clouds, hiding from the dangerous creatures far below. The only sounds in that elegant, darkness-drenched hallway were Morelli’s shifting armor, Gil’s uneven breathing, and our faint footsteps.

At the very end, Laurie skidded to a stop.

When I realized there were two faeries standing in the shadows, I felt my powers tense like muscles, readying to strike with the force of a viper. But neither of them sounded an alarm.

“You’re late,” the faerie on the left said.

“Tabby was having some trouble with the cameras,” Laurie countered. “Shall we continue chatting about it, or would you like to flee for our lives?”

Now I looked at the faeries with interest, and they looked back. One male, one female. They were dressed like courtiers. Neither of them said a word, but their cool gazes lingered on to my face. They would be seeing the beautiful illusion, no doubt. I wondered if they were always this silent when Laurie introduced them to someone. Maybe they’d never met one of my kind before, or maybe they resented me for everything I’d cost Laurie. For a moment, I felt like a bug under a magnifying glass, but then I remembered who I was. I lifted my chin and stared back at them.

Laurie didn’t give me a chance to say anything—he turned, grasped the bottom of my shirt and, in a blur of movement, ripped half of it away. The cold air was a shock against my bare stomach. I didn’t protest, though, because it was obvious what he was doing. Confirming my suspicions, Laurie handed the scrap of material to Morelli, who left us without a word.

I watched him go, wondering if it was loyalty to Laurie or a substantial compensation that prompted the faerie to risk his life for a stranger.

Laurie proceeded to rip off each of my sleeves and give those to the others. They, too, hurried away the instant they had a scrap of clothing clutched in their fingers. The sound of their footsteps hadn't fully faded when Laurie wrapped his fingers around mine and tugged, his meaning clear. *Run.*

"I assume you have a plan?" I asked under my breath, glancing behind to make sure Gil was following. He was on my heels, his spiky hair a splash of color in the dim. His expression was grim and I could sense his fear all around us. It was in my mouth, too, and it tasted like… blood.

"Don't I always?" Laurie countered. Once again, he spoke without sparing me a glance.

"Okay, well, does your plan include getting Finn—"

"Fortuna, for once in your life, will you just shut up and trust me?"

It was his use of my name that kept me from arguing. I settled for a glare instead. The three of us continued on through the shadowed, ornate hallways, and I didn't attempt to ask about Finn again. Later, I told myself. Laurie was risking far more than his throne to save me this time. The thought made me feel a stab of guilt.

Paintings of bearded men and solemn-faced women seemed to watch us as we passed. Normally I'd be curious about them. I'd wonder whether some of them were Laurie's ancestors. But right now, I was focused on getting the fuck out of this place.

Voices floated through the air. Before I could question whether it was courtiers or guards, I heard the undeniable clatter of armor. Laurie dove to the side, pulling me with him, and I found myself in a place within the wall that had been adjusted to fit a column. We were tucked behind it, mostly out of sight, but if either of the guards rushing by bothered to look, they'd find us without difficulty. Where was Gil? I craned my neck, hoping he'd found a hiding place of his own.

The vampire peered back from across the hallway, tucked in an identical nook. Seeing the overly bright sheen in his eyes—his hunter's instincts and bloodlust kicking in—I sent a feeling of encouragement down the bond. He sent an identical feeling back, silently reassuring me. *I'm fine.*

He wouldn’t be fine for much longer if he didn’t get some human blood.

I hid the thought from Gil and shifted out of sight again, breathing more calmly now that I knew where he was. The Guardians hurried past a second later, their clanking armor oddly synchronized. It felt like every bone in my body had turned to ice. I stood in the thick shadows, trying not to think about what would happen if they found us.

I would use my powers. I would feast until I was delirious. And then I’d kill every living creature inside this palace. Since the return of the Nightmare, I had been so worried about Belanor using me for his spell that I hadn’t thought about the other dangers. The entire reason I’d asked Cyrus for his help.

Great job not thinking about it, *Fortuna*. Just as I finished the thought, I noticed that the synchronized clatter had faded. Were they gone? I refocused on Laurie, wondering why he hadn’t moved. The moment our gazes met, I comprehended that we were still smashed together, chest-to-chest in this gilded pocket.

I knew the exact moment Laurie realized it, too—his eyes darkened and his arms clenched harder around me. Whether it was intentional or not, I didn’t know. All I knew was that his heartbeat was nearly identical to mine. It became the loudest sound in the universe, like fragments of a crashing meteor hitting the ground. *Boom. Boom. Boom.*

“They’re gone,” Gil said, making me jump. He stood near the pillar. I hadn’t even heard his approach.

Laurie must’ve heard him coming, though, because he didn’t react. After another second, he tore away and his expression smoothed into a neutral mask. I watched his silver eyes scan the hallway. Deeming it safe, the faerie slipped into the open, and I quickly moved to follow.

I started when I felt Laurie’s fingers skim the tender skin along the inside of my arm, then fold into the spaces between my own. I glanced up at him, but he didn’t look back. Laurie led us silently through the shadows again, keeping close to the wall.

We’d nearly reached the end of yet another hallway when he let go of my hand. Laurie took his phone out of his pocket, activated the flashlight, and held it out to me. I took it, more questions hovering at the back of my throat. I swallowed them all—after everything he’d done, Laurie deserved my trust.

“This is the only place the guards won’t search,” Laurie muttered. The lines of his body were tense, which spoke volumes, as Laurie never worried about anything. When I saw that, my own anxiety heightened until it was practically a hum at the back of my head.

We stood in front of a narrow door made of cherry-toned wood. Faeries apparently liked their carvings, regardless of which Court they were in—intricate lines and shapes had been cut into that smooth surface. Feathers. Dozens and dozens of feathers, I thought.

Without another word, Laurie reached into his pocket and knelt. I watched as he began to pick the lock with expert precision. I didn’t know why I was surprised; Laurie had probably learned how to get inside forbidden rooms before he was out of diapers. I pointed the light so it shone on his hands, even though he probably didn’t need it. Only a few seconds later, we all heard a *click*. Laurie quickly got to his feet, opened the door, and ushered us in. I barely had a chance to register the familiar smell of dirt before Laurie closed the door behind him.

We were in a passage between the walls—it was obvious from the closeness of the space and the wooden beams.

“I’ll go first,” Gil muttered. In spite of what I’d told him in the cell, he didn’t trust Laurie. I could sense his wariness within that beautiful dust floating between us. When he started off, I followed automatically.

Laurie brought up the rear, and he didn’t make a single joke about the view or anything else. His silence was unnerving. He held up his cell phone again, lending us the small glow of the flashlight app. It only made everything look more sinister.

From what little I could see, the passage swiftly became a tunnel. The walls farther down seemed to be formed of rocky earth and precarious-looking wooden archways, and there was an abandoned feeling that clung to the cold, as if no one had been here in a long, long time.

My instincts balked at going deeper into the darkness. I was tired of running from scary faeries underground. Why wouldn’t we fight for our lives on the surface, like normal people? My agitation began to rise, and the weak nudges of comfort from Gil had no effect.

“Can you move through the entire palace like this?” I murmured, trying to distract myself.

When Laurie didn’t respond, I looked over my shoulder at him. He shook his head, wordlessly answering the question, *No*. His silence made

me wonder if our voices could carry to the guards searching for us.

The path sloped downward. Eventually the hard floor became dirt. There was a strange smell in my nostrils, but I couldn't define it. It got stronger and stronger with every step. My stomach began to churn. *Something doesn't feel right*, instinct insisted.

Then Laurie turned his phone off.

As soon as the flashlight was gone, the darkness was absolute—there were no windows or cracks of light around us. I resisted the urge to search for Laurie's hand, and he didn't offer it again. For several seconds, all I had to guide me through the oblivion were their faint footsteps. Then we walked around a curve in the tunnel, and indistinct shadows flickered over the walls. There were probably torches farther down the path.

Soon after that, we arrived at a gate.

It might have been black, once, but time and damp had reduced the bars to rust. Did this lead to sewers beneath the city? Were we leaving palace grounds?

Flakes drifted off the gate when Laurie pulled on a latch. Strangely enough, the hinges barely made a sound. My brow furrowed. *Someone must oil them regularly,* I thought.

Gil was already through the gate and in the tunnel beyond it, but Laurie paused to press something into my hand. A pocketknife, I realized after a moment. It wasn't nearly as small as the one Gil had hidden in his boot—this blade could do some real damage. Why give it to me now? I grasped the handle, mentally reaching for the Nightmare inside just to make sure she was still there. I wasn't human anymore. The reminder made it easier to hold back another rush of questions.

I stepped through the gate.

Laurie closed it so gently that I only heard a faint *click*. I stared at the tunnel ahead, straining to find the source of that distant glow. Wherever it was coming from, the firelight was far enough away that I still couldn't see anything. There was only Gil, who stood waiting. His mind was a cloud of hunger and protectiveness. For me.

"What is this place?" I whispered, succumbing to the unease rumbling through my body.

"If you want to survive the next minute or so," Laurie replied, his voice dangerously calm, "I suggest you stop talking."

With that, both Gil and Laurie moved to take the lead, or maybe put me behind them. If my pulse had been fast before, it was practically wild now. Still holding the pocketknife in one hand, I reached out with my arms to use the walls as a guide. But we'd entered a bigger space, I discovered instantly. There was nothing on either side, and yards off in both directions, there were deeper pockets of shadow, like the uneven walls of a cave.

Then a *stench* assaulted me. It was so powerful that I started breathing out of my mouth. Gil and Laurie didn't stop, though. I held back a gag and kept going.

I'd only taken a few steps when something squelched beneath my foot. I looked down and frowned at the sight of something… glowing. I lifted my leg gingerly, trying not to gag at the strings of slime stretching between the ground and the bottom of my shoe. The substance gave off a slightly greenish shine.

Where the hell had Laurie taken us?

"Holy fuck," I heard Gil hiss. Before I could ask him what was wrong, or ask Laurie about the source of that smell, something dropped in front of me. I recoiled, an instinctive scream hurtling up my throat. Laurie's hand clapped over my mouth and stifled the sound. My body heaved as I struggled to breathe.

A wing hung in our path.

Slowly, I followed its length up to the ceiling.

Cherubim slept above us. They clung to rafters like bats. I struggled to breathe as I peered into the darkness again, dreading what I would see now that my eyes had adjusted. Those weren't gaps of shadow, I discovered with slow horror. They were cherubim, too, sleeping in piles throughout the room. There were so many of them, even more than the large groups that had attacked Bea's bar or come to the hospital.

A bubble of panic swelled and popped in my chest. *Why would you bring us here? What kind of plan is this?* I wanted to shriek. Just as I tensed, preparing to turn back and go back the way we'd come, I thought of Laurie's comment when he opened the door.

This is the only place the guards won't search, he had said. Not only because the reek of the cherubim disguised our own, but also because no one sane would come down here. He must've been truly desperate, if this

was the best course of action. For Laurie to endanger his own life, along with ours…

Somewhere in the darkness, one of the cherubim growled, and my thought cut short.

Laurie's fingers bit into my cheeks. He'd probably thought I was trying to scream again. As quietly as I could, I patted his wrist. *Yes, I've gotten my shit together*, I hoped it said.

A head's up about the cherubim would've been nice, though.

Slowly, Laurie released his hold on me. He eased past, crept around the fallen wing, and continued on through Hell.

Suddenly there was a scraping sound, followed by something brushing against my ankle. It felt like my heart stopped. I didn't dare to breathe as I looked down. A massive paw rested in the dirt. It was attached to a lion, which made low sounds in its sleep, his mane matted and draped over the ground. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying not to tremble, because I knew even that small movement might wake the creature. And if the cherubim made a single sound, it would alert the others.

I didn't take any calming breaths, not with that foul stench all around, but I found the courage to move again. I had to get my foot out from beneath the lion's leg. I eased back gently, twisting to slip free. Laurie and Gil hadn't noticed I'd stopped. I turned…

…and my gaze met the bright, milky eyes of a cherubim.

The creature had four heads, but the one shaped like a man seemed to be the only one that had awoken. His nostrils flared with excitement. It felt like everything was moving in slow motion as the thing began to open its mouth, doubtless to alert the rest of our presence.

I acted on adrenaline and instinct. With Laurie's knife, I stabbed the man head at the back of its throat, and any sounds it might've made drowned in a gush of blood. It was too dark to watch the life leave its eyes. It was still obvious when it happened, because the tension abruptly left the creature's body and it slumped like a dead limb.

But now I had a new problem—the lion attached to the dead man was starting to stir.

Oh, God, if it woke the cherub, the baby's piercing cry would echo through the entire room. I needed to kill it now. Quietly. I tried to yank the knife out of the man's head. The handle was slick with blood, and I lost

my grip on it when I pulled. I tried again. Same problem. A curse lodged in my throat.

I wasn't a person who prayed, but in those few seconds, I did. *Send it back to sleep, please, send it back to sleep…*

The lion's golden eyes opened.

I saw a flash of long, gleaming canines before I clamped my hands around its maw, gagging at the smell, and an instant later I felt claws swipe across my bare abdomen. I ground my teeth to contain an agonized scream, trying to arch away from its paws so the animal couldn't cause more damage. It was struggling in earnest now, and I wasn't stronger than a fucking *lion*. In a matter of seconds, the enormous cat would break free of my grip and it would all be over.

Then I saw the eagle's eyes snap open.

Fuck, I thought, knowing it would probably be the last one I ever had. I was out of hands and weapons. The eagle's head swiveled toward me, and I braced myself for that beak to part and let out an ear-splitting shriek. The lion swiped its paws again, and I managed to dodge it this time.

Laurie and Gil had finally noticed what was happening—they were blurs as they leaped forward to help. The battle was swift, soundless, and vicious. As I frantically tried to staunch the bleeding along my stomach, worried the coppery smell would rouse more of the beasts or break Gil, I caught a glimpse of Laurie ripping out the lion's tongue and Gil snapping the eagle's neck.

They'd both turned their attention to the drowsy cherub when my vision went black around the edges. The lion must've struck something vital, or I'd lost more blood than I realized. I stood there, swaying.

An arm clamped around my waist, and I felt myself being hauled backward. I would've been alarmed were it not for the familiar scent surrounding me, almost blocking the fetid odor of the cherubim. *Laurie*.

There was another rasping sound, and my mind was slow to place it. The bars of a second gate, sliding home into the wall. We were safe. If I weren't already slumped and motionless, I would've bent over from the overwhelming rush of relief. Laurie and Gil would be okay. They'd make it out of here.

Laurie set me down, propping me against the dirt wall.

"The lion mangled my arm," I heard him say above me. "It'll take at least twenty minutes to heal. Can you carry her?"

“There’s too much blood, man,” Gil answered, his voice tight. “If I go near her…”

He didn’t finish his sentence, but he didn’t need to. We all knew how it ended. I felt, rather than saw, Laurie kneel in front of me. “You need to feed, Fortuna.”

His tone caught my attention, even through the haze of pain. “Feed?” I echoed faintly.

“Yes. On me.”

I finally managed to look at Laurie, blinking a few extra times to make edges more solid. His eyes were luminous, almost as bright as the lion’s. I felt no fear, though. They made me think of moonlight on water.

“Take my fear,” he clarified. The lines of Laurie’s face were hard, somehow, and he said the words firmly. As if he’d brook no refusal.

He knew, then, about the rush of euphoria and strength that came with using my power. Maybe it was that way for every Fallen creature. It wouldn’t heal my ravaged body, but it would provide enough endurance to get us out of this tunnel.

I struggled to think of all the reasons why this was a bad idea. The first one that came to mind was, refreshingly, of the consequences. Things had been changing between me and Laurie. If I did this, if I saw something in his head about me, there would be no more pretending. No going back to the safe guise of friendship and that platonic divide.

It was a risk I had to take. In the time it took Laurie’s arm to heal, the cherubim could wake up and detect us here. That gate didn’t look very promising against a horde of monsters.

“Don’t fight me,” I whispered to Laurie. “If you fight me, it’ll hurt more.”

He nodded, still keeping all emotion from his face. He didn’t make any of his suggestive comments as I put my bloody hands on his arms. I hadn’t used my abilities since their return, but even if they had reverted to those of an ordinary Nightmare, I didn’t need to touch Laurie—we’d already had physical contact. I didn’t know why I took hold of him like that, and I decided not to think about it.

I closed my eyes and delved into the shadow world.

Despite how recently I’d regained my abilities as a Nightmare, it was as easy as breathing. Some part of me had been worried the dragonfire

changed everything. I released a breath of relief and concentrated on Laurie again.

For the first time, I went near his powerful mind and it was completely vulnerable. I couldn't deny a whisper of curiosity. Giving in to the urge, I placed myself within Laurie's memory palace and opened my eyes again.

It didn't surprise me in the least that behind the massive, impenetrable wall he'd erected, there was a hedge maze. What did surprise me was the glittering layer of frost covering every leaf and stone. The sky above, though nighttime, was lit up with galaxies of colors, darkness, and stars.

Something about this place made me think of Collith.

An ache started in my chest. In the next breath, desperate to forget the faerie king I'd left at the Unseelie Court, I began running through the maze.

I couldn't resist teasing Laurie a bit. *I expected a shopping mall,* I said. He didn't answer—he was on edge, fighting the instinct to push me out of his head—but an image of his smile flitted through my own thoughts. It was a confirmation, as if I needed one, of how powerful Laurie truly was. Few people had the ability to communicate with me while I was violating their innermost selves.

I kept going. As usual, the smallest fears were the most readily available to my call. I was faintly amused to discover that Laurie was afraid of horses. *Have you seen their teeth?* he demanded, picking up on this. I could feel his indignation, in addition to hearing it.

You would know, considering you were probably alive when people still rode them for transportation, I countered. Once again, there was a faint note of teasing in my tone.

But Laurie didn't respond, and I realized that I was trying to fall back into our usual rhythm. I was so desperate to draw that familiar line between us that I'd forgotten the severity of why I was in Laurie's head. We didn't have time for this. I took a mental breath and continued through the twists of the maze.

I had assumed Laurie was a younger faerie. I remembered Collith mentioning that they'd grown up together, and I knew my ex had been born in this century. But the moments and images and memories I moved past in Laurie's mind were older. I could only see the things tinged in fear, but they were vibrant as the faerie himself. I saw horse-drawn carriages. Steaming locomotives. Flappers and big-wheeled automobiles.

Then there was Laurie. I saw him as a toddler, doted on by all the palace servants. That didn't change as he aged. Although I'd seen dozens of fae children and teenagers during my time at the Unseelie Court, it was strange to see Laurie as one. None of these tiny, harmless fears would give me what I needed. I had to go deeper.

I didn't want to do this, I realized suddenly. It was in my nature to hunt and feast, but at some point in these past few weeks, Laurie had become family. I wouldn't purposefully hurt him any more than I would hurt Damon, Matthew, Emma, or any of the other people who had claimed pieces of my heart.

At least I had learned one thing from this experiment—using my powers hadn't made me become the dark creature I'd been before. I wasn't the power-hungry villainess Gwyn had foretold. Not yet.

I was still in the maze when Laurie spoke again. *Why are you hesitating?* he asked. *Go for the kill, Firecracker.*

Every second I remained frozen in indecision was another second we were in danger. Nodding, I returned to the wintry maze and hurried down more seemingly endless rows of hedges. I counted in my head, trying to keep track of time. So far I'd been in here for a minute. I'd give myself one more. After that, we'd simply have to wait for Laurie's arm to heal.

It turned out, I didn't need another minute. I didn't find the center. What I did find, though, was the truth. It lurked in a shadowed corner like most truths did.

Unlike the majority of my victims, there was no significant memory attached to his greatest fear. Laurie hadn't experienced much trauma or pain, because he'd always been clever, charming… and elusive. He didn't often get attached and his abilities made it easy to remove himself from any situation. But Laurie knew himself. He was a person constantly in motion. He thrived off it.

Which was why, above all else, he feared being immobilized. Trapped. Crippled.

An idea bloomed in my head. A way to show Laurie some of the kindness he'd shown me, but still borrow the strength I needed for us to escape that rank tunnel. I hadn't forgotten the danger we were in, out in the real world. This felt just as important, somehow.

Swallowing, I weaved the hallucination around Laurie like a spiderweb. *No*, I thought, wincing at the thought. *Like a tapestry*.

“Open your eyes,” I whispered.

But Laurie didn’t. He felt the seat beneath him, and though he couldn’t see it, he knew it was a wheelchair. I saw his fingers close into fists on top of the armrests. His jaw clenched. Terror filled the air and rushed through me.

Ignoring the instinct to revel in it, I knelt between Laurie’s legs. Even now, he wouldn’t move or speak. I leaned forward to cup his face. I pressed my lips to his, just once, testing.

Laurie visibly startled—he was so focused on the chair, on what he’d lost, that even his quick mind took a moment to process what was happening.

When he did recover, Laurie’s mouth moved against mine with the same skill he’d displayed outside Creiddylad’s tomb. One of his hands rose, and I felt his fingers bury in my hair, pulling me even closer. In a way, it felt like our first kiss, because the others hadn’t been entirely my choice. Laurie used just the right amount of tongue, and the sensual sound he made lit a fire inside me. Of its own volition, my hand slid down his chest, along the length of his hard stomach, and finally stopped on the bulge in his dress pants. I rubbed it, making a breathy sound of my own, and Laurie’s grip on me tightened. One of his hands dropped, tugging what remained of my shirt down as it went. He brushed my nipple with the pad of his thumb.

I pulled away and waited. Slowly, his lips still swollen from our kiss, Laurie opened his eyes at last.

We were on top of a mountain. It wasn’t real, but my hold over his mind was absolute, and there was no way to tell the difference. There was a cool breeze against our skin, stirring the strands of our hair, and everything we touched felt solid.

“Even if our worst fears come to pass, it’s not the end. We can still live, and love, and flourish,” I said quietly.

Laurie stared at me with an expression I’d never seen on his face before. Even though I was inside his head, I couldn’t name it. What I did know was that his fear had completely faded.

Suddenly Gil’s voice sliced between us, and it felt like someone had dumped a bucket of icy water over my head. I took another step backward and made a gesture meant to lessen the wind. Even when it was gone, I couldn’t make out what Gil was saying, but the urgency in his tone was

obvious. It occurred to me that we'd left our vulnerable bodies with a newborn vampire.

I'd gotten what I needed—it was time to go.

At the same moment I straightened, I extracted myself from Laurie's psyche. There was an instant of disorientation, the world a tilted smear of red and black. I blinked rapidly and everything soon righted itself. The instant it did, I noticed a familiar prickling sensation in my eyes, and I knew they were glowing red.

I uttered a soft curse and squeezed them shut again. Why did this keep happening? I breathed deeply, waiting for the burning to fade. Then I felt Laurie's warm palms cup my jaw.

"Open your eyes," he whispered, exactly as I had just said the words to him. His breath teased my lips.

I hesitated. I wasn't sure what made me obey—curiosity, maybe, or that streak of rebellion I could never completely control. We looked at each other, the red glow of my eyes reflecting in his, as if Laurie were a silver mirror. I cleared my throat and glanced around, acclimating myself to reality again. We were still underground, close enough to the cherubim that their smell immediately reached for my senses. Not exactly a great location for making out.

The stray thought made me freeze. I had just kissed Laurie. Of my own volition. *Shit, shit, shit*. What did I just do?

Eager to leave, I pushed myself up from the ground effortlessly, experiencing only a twinge of discomfort—as we'd hoped, dining on Laurie's terror had lent me a surge of energy. The pain would set in later, I knew. What mattered now was that I was able to follow Gil and Laurie down the rest of the passageway.

None of us spoke. The ground started slanting upward again. I held my hand against my torn stomach, hoping to find bandages wherever we were bound. Maybe even a first aid kit, if I was lucky. Fallen weren't often prone to infection, but it was a possibility.

After a few minutes, the silence was broken by the sound of stone scraping against stone. A ray of moonlight slanted over the ground. I emerged and discovered we were entering a sitting room, of sorts, and the opening in the wall was behind a fireplace. From the distance we'd gone, I suspected we were in a different wing of the palace now. Because of the cherubim, I had expected the passageway to end in a garden or on the

street. There must've been a third way out of that lightless room, since I highly doubted those grotesque creatures frolicked through the palace every time Belanor sent them out into the world.

Laurie pushed the fireplace back, tendons standing out in his arms. Worried he would try to reclaim my hand, and evoke another response from me, I crossed my arms and turned to Gil. "How much time do we have? Ballpark?"

Lines deepened around his mouth; he knew what I was really asking. Gil hadn't told me that he'd decided to finish the transition, but I was a Nightmare. I didn't need a bond to tell me he was afraid. Vampire or not, Gil didn't want to die.

Laurie moved past us, leaving a trail of his intoxicating scent. The vampire left my question unanswered and went after him.

I did the same, frowning. We entered a new hallway, no less grand than the one we'd just fled. Laurie strode across its length and halted. Once again, he opened a door—the hinges let out a whine that made my pulse quicken with anxiety—and inclined his head. Gil's shoulders were hunched as he hurried past, his movements abrupt and fast. Seeing that, I knew he was teetering on the edge of control. I remembered that moment in the hallway, too, when he'd appeared without making a sound. Vampires could be even quieter than faeries, especially if they were on a hunt.

Thinking this, I was slow to step over the threshold. My gaze darted around, but there was no sign of Gil. He was probably trying to put some distance between us. From the smell still emanating from my skin and clothes. I started to reach for the bond and stopped myself. I'd invaded enough people's privacy for one day.

Instead, I turned in a circle. Laurie closed the door and locked it.

"Where are we?" I asked. I knew I should be terrified and exhausted, but it felt like my veins were singing. Laurie's fear had been so heady that, even now, all I wanted was to spin more illusions for him, like a witch with a spindle.

The Seelie Prince put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the doors. Tension visibly seeped from his body, making me realize how well he'd been hiding it until this moment. His sleeve was torn and stained, but the arm beneath it was already half-healed, by the looks of it.

"These are my rooms," Laurie answered wearily. "Judging from the lingering scents, the guards have already been here. They won't check

again for a while, and by then, we should be long gone."

I glanced around again. Our surroundings weren't what I would've expected of Laurelis, the mischievous and slippery faerie I'd known until now. Throughout the space, which was separated into six rooms, I saw colorful Persian rugs and vibrant paintings in golden frames. The scent of incense drifted through the air. There were books everywhere, neatly arranged on shelves or bookended atop flat surfaces.

Another reader, I thought ruefully, reaching out with a blood-crusted finger to touch an embossed cover. The title was in a language I didn't recognize.

"What happens now?" I asked, raising my gaze. "Is there a way to get some human blood for Gil?"

Laurie pulled his phone out and glanced at it. Whatever he saw made him frown, and his thumbs moved swiftly over the screen. His expression was distracted as he said, "I've already put in a request for a delivery. What happens now is, we wait. The Royal Guard always has every exit manned or blocked. One of my… associates is working to remedy that. She'll notify us when it's safe to move. The window will be narrow. Hopefully just long enough to get you and the vampire back into fighting shape and see you off. I will remain here, of course, so that it doesn't appear that I've left the palace right when Belanor's secret prisoner escaped. Now, you mentioned that my brother wants you alive. Why?"

I had a thousand questions to ask before I could answer Laurie's. "What about Finn? Can't you just use your abilities to get us out of here? Hide us from sight?"

"If that were an option, we'd already be in the streets of Munich. Belanor can sense my power. Perhaps it has something to do with our sharing a womb." Lines of fatigue marked the skin beneath his crystalline eyes. "Are you hungry? I don't make a habit of keeping food here, but I believe there's a jar of olives behind the bar. Also, your werewolf should be safe by—"

The doors burst open. Laurie and I both spun. The air thickened with our power, tensed and ready like a sword. Gil must've been rocking in a corner somewhere, because he didn't appear even after the bond lit up with my fear.

A purple-haired faerie stormed into the room. I could see pointed ears holding up what looked like a masquerade mask, and there was a distinctly

feminine shape beneath the neck-to-shin armor. I noted that it wasn't the armor of a Guardian, but rather something more suited to modern warfare. In typical fae flair, there were black wings adorning her broad shoulders.

The female slammed the door with her booted foot, breathing hard. I could tell from her bared teeth that her ragged breaths were from fury, not depletion. She reached up with one hand to yank her mask off, tossing it to the side. With her other hand, she held her stomach, and a steady stream of blood trickled between her fingers. When I saw that, I steeled myself to hear the thunder of Gil's approach.

He still didn't come out.

"There are at least seventeen ways that could have gone better. Literally. Like, I'm counting them right now," the faerie snapped, glaring at the one beside me. Her glare was particularly ferocious because she wore thick eyeliner. She had the typical fae beauty. Her skin was creamy, her nose dotted with freckles that were more refined than Oliver's, somehow.

"We were working with limited resources, Lensa. I don't know who I can trust right now," Laurie said testily. His eyes dipped to the wound at her gut. "That looks deep. If you need a healer, Maria is on her way."

The remark made me blink, because it was a reminder of my own injury. Laurie's fear still lingered in my veins, and the energy it provided had made me completely forget about why I'd needed to feed on him in the first place. I glanced down and noted the front of my shirt—or what remained of it—was now drenched in red. The marks from the lion's claws ached, but it was nothing to the blazing agony I'd felt in that foul-smelling darkness.

"What I need are *answers*. Who is this and why did I just risk my life for her and a fucking werewolf?" The newcomer stared at me, and within seconds, her eyes hardened with recognition."Fuck. You're her, aren't you? Are you kidding me, Laurelis? This is some real Helen of Troy shit. I can't believe I fell for your lies again. 'It's an old friend,' you told me. Now we've both broken the Law just so you can stick it to Sylvyre one more time."

There was unveiled disgust in the faerie's voice. How did she know who I was? Was this yet another person that could see my true face?

Laurie looked as though he wanted to sigh. "No Law was broken," he said wearily. "Even if Lady Sworn hadn't publicly denounced him, their

mating bond has been dissolved. Not to mention that Collith Sylvyre doesn't have the backing of the Unseelie Court anymore. *This* is why I don't tell you anything—you start yelling, and I haven't had any drinks today to dull my senses. Don't you care at all that our dear brother was torturing her?"

"Not at the expense of starting a war," Lensa snarled. This time, Laurie let out the faintest of sighs.

Now that I was finally able to get a word in edgewise, my first instinct was to respond with something sarcastic and biting… but I was already surrounded by enemies. For once, I swallowed the barbed words. "You're his sister," was all I said.

She scowled, and even if Laurie hadn't given it away, I could see him in her features. They had the same high cheekbones and dramatic brows. "Don't remind me. I didn't get any say in the matter," she countered.

I finally registered the rest of what she'd said. "Wait, you freed Finn? Where is he?"

Laurie made a sound of impatience, drawing our attention to him. But his gaze was fixed downward. "You're bleeding on my rug, Lensa. And considering you're here, I take it you were unable to procure us access to an exit?"

"That would be a negative," she said through her teeth. "Oncith was on duty; there must've been a last-minute shift change. He caught us and cut the wolf down. The guards arrived before I could intervene, and my choice was to stay and get arrested, or run. I imagine the wolf is with the other prisoners by now. He was still alive, last I saw him."

This last part she directed at me, probably sensing the urgent question rising to my lips. Laurie's brow lowered, and for the first time since he'd come into my cell, he finally looked perturbed. "The tides are turning much quicker than I expected."

"Any word on Belanor himself?" I asked Lensa, hating the taste of his name in my mouth.

Now it was her turn to frown. *She hasn't heard,* I thought. The Royal Guard was keeping it quiet that I'd broken Belanor's skull like a rotten pumpkin. If Lensa loved her brothers, and something told me she did, the purple-haired warrior probably wouldn't react well to hearing of his murder. Suddenly I had one more reason to get out of this place.

Before Lensa could ask what I meant, Laurie faced us, and his mask was firmly back in place. “It’s time for plan B, I suppose.”

“What’s plan B?” I asked, my hands clenched into anxious fists.

“Later. For now, Lensa, you should change into a pretty gown and start roaming the halls. Be seen by as many courtiers as possible. You’ll need an alibi when Morelli is forced to investigate who helped the prisoner with her escape.”

“You just want to save your ridiculous rug,” his sister snapped. “Morelli is *your* Right Hand; he’d sooner cut his own off before he betrayed you. And what about your alibi? It’s already widely known that you have a… soft spot for the Unseelie Queen. If it becomes public knowledge that she was downstairs, and someone broke her out, fingers will start pointing in your direction. Were you careful about covering your tracks?”

“Let me worry about that.” Laurie looked at me, still frowning thoughtfully. “Did Belanor say anything about why he took you? The only information my spies were able to garner was that he’d declared you a prisoner of ‘utmost importance.’ None of the Guardians knew who you were or what your crime was.”

I opened my mouth at the same moment there was a knock at the door. The siblings both went still, and for an instant, a tense silence filled the suite. The blood in my veins sounded louder, more forceful, and I struggled to control my breathing.

“That’s my cue,” Lensa muttered. Laurie’s expression was resigned. I glanced between the two of them, aware that I was missing something. They weren’t acting like it was Belanor or the Royal Guard at the door, and I couldn’t sense any fear.

Without another word, Lensa strode toward the other end of the room. I frowned in confusion—there were no doors on that side, nothing but a fireplace and paneled walls—but then she pulled on one of those wooden panels. It cracked open soundlessly, and Lensa slipped through the narrow space, vanishing into the darkness beyond. There must’ve been a handle on the other side, because the panel moved back into place, looking for all the world like part of the wall again.

Once she was gone, I turned back to Laurie. He was already looking at me, and something about his expression made it seem as though he were on the verge of speaking. When he stayed silent, I raised my eyebrows

expectantly. Laurie's lips thinned. He shook his head, more to himself than me, I thought. "I'd hoped to avoid this," he said.

Before I could ask him who stood in the hallway, or why Lensa had fled, the faerie prince crossed the room.

He opened one of the doors and stepped aside.

Another female walked into the room.

I knew instantly that she was different from most of the fae I'd met—her tread was slightly heavier, as if she were accustomed to wearing boots or armor. Her beauty was typical of her kind, though. Mab was ancient, and yet she didn't look much older than forty. She had a curtain of ash-brown hair and her skin was fair. Her eyes were vibrantly green. She wore a dramatic gown of maroon velvet, which rustled like a whispering crowd as she stopped in the center of the room and faced me.

"Well, don't be rude, dear," the faerie chided, raising her raven brows at Laurie. She held her hand out in my direction, her fingers dangling elegantly. I was supposed to kiss it, I realized, still darting glances at Laurie.

He didn't sigh, but his expression bore the signs of one. His voice was flat as he said, "Fortuna, allow me to introduce you to my mother, Queen Mab of the Seelie Court."

CHAPTER NINE

"Queen Regent," the tall female corrected Laurie, hardly sparing him a glance. Her focus had gone downward, fixing on the torn mess of my midsection. Mab's tone was mild as she remarked, "Your guest is injured, Laurelis."

"Yes, Mother, I'm quite aware, thank you. Maria should be here soon."

"Fortuna," the Queen Regent murmured thoughtfully, studying me. "Would you happen to be Fortuna Sworn? The Nightmare that's been making such a fuss recently?"

If she weren't a faerie, and if she weren't Belanor's mother, I might've liked her blatant disregard for etiquette.

"Correct," I said, meeting her vibrant gaze. Laurie's scent may have made me think of springtime, but peering into Mab's eyes transported me there, and it felt as if I were surrounded by trees sporting huge, freshly-sprouted leaves. Following a stray but insistent instinct, I decided to match the queen's bluntness and added, "I thought Laurie's mother was dead."

Viessa had been the one to tell me, in fact, during the conversation when I first learned who Laurie was. *His mother's nickname for him, while she was still alive*, she'd said.

Later, I assumed it was true when I heard Laurie speaking of his mother in the past tense.

The Queen Regent didn't seem to take offense to my comment. "By blood, I am the children's aunt. Many years ago, their biological mother, my sister, was killed by her lover. Oberon."

She said his name as if it had happened yesterday. Her face didn't change, but her voice held such quiet hatred that my skin prickled with

awareness. *This is a person to be afraid of*, instinct whispered.

Unaware of the tension coiling inside me, Queen Mab turned toward Laurie and gave him a close-lipped smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I came to raise the children and hold the throne for Laurelis until he deemed himself ready. Which I have now returned to do for Prince Belanor," she finished.

"I had no idea," was all I could think to say. It was the truth. Laurie had never spoken of this, any of it. We had far more in common than I could've imagined—both of us with a parent taken violently, both of us raised by females who weren't our mothers. Not from birth, at least. Whatever his quarrel with her, Laurie did refer to Mab as his mother, which was more than I could say for me and Maureen.

As the awkward silence continued, Queen Mab tilted her head and studied me anew. At that moment, I finally saw Laurie. He must've taken after his father in most ways, but he had the curve of his aunt's neck, her inquisitive movements. "How extraordinary. And here I thought your kind had been extinguished from the world," Mab remarked.

"There are still a few of us around, if you know where to look," I said. My mind flashed back to that moment, Gil leaning against the wall, his bleached hair gleaming in the fluorescent lights. Those had been his words. Back when he was still a Nightmare, and we hadn't crept through the bowels of Hell to escape Belanor Dondarte's reach. It already felt like that had been hours ago.

As Queen Mab stared down at me, I thought about what I'd read of her from the books in Collith's library. She had a twin, Titania—twins ran in the family, it seemed—who was apparently Laurie's biological mother. Before Mab was a queen, she'd been a warrior. In those ancient days, she'd gone by the name Maeve, and I wasn't sure why she'd changed it. She was not known for cruelty or darkness, but she was not afraid to take lives or spill blood.

The books also called her Queen Wolf.

"Tomorrow," she announced, startling me, "I will host a ball. No, a fundraiser, and my enthusiasm for the cause will explain the rapid timing. I cannot openly act against my son—with his coronation on the horizon, and the sheer number of supporters he's gained, such a thing would surely cleave this Court in two—so the rest I leave to you."

"Might be for the best to make it a masked event," Laurie put in.

Queen Mab considered this only for a second before she nodded. She started to turn away.

“Why would you help me? What do you want?” I asked, knowing it was foolish even as the words left my mouth. Faeries were fickle and violent; Mab could get annoyed and change her mind in a blink.

Mab appraised me again, her face expressionless. Looking back at her, I suddenly got the sense that I was speaking to something very, very ancient. Goosebumps rose across my skin. “I love my children, Lady Sworn, even when one of them is born with darkness in his heart,” the queen said. “If I cannot bring myself to end him, I will do whatever I can to slow his descent.”

By the time she finished speaking, it was obvious to me that Mab knew. She *knew* how evil Belanor was, and she wasn’t going to do anything about it. She was saving my life, for whatever reason, but I’d bet most of her son’s victims weren’t so lucky. It was impossible that a faerie as intelligent as Mab was unaware of the Games. How many people had died because she looked the other way while Belanor explored his darkness?

Before I could form a response, Mab’s smile changed. It was subtle, but the tilt to her lips said that she’d seen my disgust. “Well met, Lady Sworn,” she murmured, turning away again.

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t trust myself.

Laurie left my side to walk his mother to the door. They’d only taken two steps when the queen moved. Quick as a rattlesnake strike, her pale hand reached for Laurie’s arm.

“This is how we keep it neutral,” she said quietly, her grip on him fierce. Her fingernails, painted black, gleamed in the lamplight. “This is how our family survives.”

“It’s always about neutrality for you,” Laurie muttered back. “Imagine the fun we could wreak upon the world if you’d just let loose once in a while.”

They were speaking in code, I thought as I stood there, a silent audience to this strange play. Their tones said they’d had this conversation countless times before, and both knew it would always end the same way. Mab lifted her hand and briefly cupped Laurie’s cheek, murmuring, “Sleep well, my child.”

He just nodded and stepped back. Mab turned as though she were unaffected by his coldness. The guards standing outside must’ve heard her

footsteps, because the doors opened before she reached them. They stood on either side of her as she passed, and two more guards in the hall shifted to put their bodies ahead and behind Mab.

They left the doors open as they walked away. Watching them march in a cluster down the hall, I had a moment of déjà vu, and I knew I never wanted to be a queen again.

Laurie moved to close the doors. “I can see why you preferred Naevys,” I said flatly.

He lifted one shoulder in a dismissive shrug, straightening. In the next moment he strode past me, fussing with his waistcoat like a bride on her wedding day. “From the very first day Mab arrived at the palace, Belanor was her favorite,” Laurie said without turning.

I hurried to follow, glancing around us for any sign of Gil. Where was his blood delivery?

“Maybe because she pitied him,” Laurie continued as he crossed the foyer. His suite was shaped like a star, with every point holding a closed door or an open doorway. “He could never keep up, you see. Not just with the games we played, but in everything. He struggled with our lessons and the conversations happening around him. It even took him longer to reach adolescence. I was nearing maturity just as he experienced his first growth spurt. Looking back now, I do wish we’d been a bit kinder to him. But that’s why he brought something out in the Wolf Queen the rest of us never seemed to be able to—maternal love. She even got him a damn dog that sheds everywhere.”

While he spoke, we ended up in an enormous marble bathroom. I expected the lights to be harsh, but they shone gently from modern sconces along the walls. The rest was every bit the sort of bathroom I would assume Laurie to have. The vanity held two wide sinks and the biggest mirror I’d ever seen. On the other side, a rain shower head was set in a space formed by one wall made entirely of ivy and another of thick glass. There was also a freestanding tub at the other end of the room, set upon a dais like a throne. A single light shone down on it.

I leaned my shoulder against the doorway, feeling awkward about being in his space. Something kept me there, though. “You don’t talk about your father much,” I ventured. “None of you do.”

Now that I thought about it, I had never seen a mention of Dondarte in Collith’s books or Kindreth’s journals.

Leaving my words dangling between us, Laurie opened one of the drawers and removed a small pair of silver scissors. His posture said he didn't want to talk about his parents or the scene I'd witnessed. I also longed to ask about his birth mother, Titiana. The one who had coined the nickname that suited him so perfectly.

Viessa's voice whispered through my head again. *Some call him Laurie*.

How much things had changed since then. Now I watched my vain friend, Seelie King no longer, snip a loose thread off his waistcoat. The silence stretched, but I still couldn't bring myself to walk away. Laurie put the scissors back in the drawer, then began rolling up his sleeves. Seeing his mother had agitated him, I thought, noting the abruptness of how he moved. Much different than his usual thoughtless grace.

My voice was soft. Hesitant. "I know it's a cliché, but missing out on you really was her loss, Laurie."

The faerie prince turned a sink handle, and water trickled from the faucet. The delicate sound filled the space between us. As Laurie bent to wash his hands, his eyes met mine in the mirror. They looked darker, like a shadow passing over the moon. "Spare me your pity, please. I much prefer your disdain," he said finally.

He'd never used that tone with me before. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell Laurie it wasn't pity I felt, but that would be a lie. I decided to move on, especially when there were so many other topics we needed to cover.

"Fine. Is there a reason you never mentioned that you had a twin brother?" I asked, matching his terseness.

"Half the time, I forget he exists." Laurie's voice was toneless now, and he focused on his vigorous scrubbing. I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not. Bubbles ran into the drain and the air smelled like expensive, masculine soap.

I fell silent again, trying to think of the best way to continue this conversation. It didn't seem to be going well. After another moment, Laurie turned off the water.

"You've changed. I suppose I have my brother to thank for that." Laurie reached for a towel, folded neatly on the counter, and dried his hands. He refolded it and put it back exactly as it had been before.

I bristled. "What do you mean?"

“You’re more careful now. You’ve lost that streak of chaos I adored so much.”

“I haven’t *lost* anything,” I said, raising my chin. Laurie’s eyes flashed, and I realized that he’d been provoking me. Trying to goad me into an argument so I wouldn’t ask about his complicated family. Clever, clever Laurie. Belanor and Mab were clearly touchy subjects, and I understood that better than anyone. For now, I decided to let it slide.

“We’ll circle back to that,” I said. “What we really need to be talking about is Finn.”

Laurie leaned against the edge of the counter and folded his arms, making his biceps strain against his dress shirt. “No, what we *really* need to be talking about is that kiss,” he informed me.

I sucked in a breath. *Oh. Right.* I’d finally managed to stop thinking about it, and Laurie was ruining everything. He waited for my response, his eyes glittering now. I bounced between the things I wanted to say, rejecting them all. Fear bloomed in my throat like flowers, trapping air and words alike inside me. “I… I was just…”

The sound of knocking floated between us. I squelched the urge to release a breath of relief.

Laurie’s expression said he heard it, anyway. He brushed past me to leave the bathroom, using more of his body than was necessary. For an instant, his chest slid across my breasts. I swallowed as I turned to follow Laurie back into the foyer. Once again, he opened the door without any fear, emanating that fae arrogance I once found so detestable.

Another faerie stood in the hallway.

“Ah, Maria. Prompt as ever, I see.” Laurie moved his hands as he spoke, giving the healer a warm smile. I stared at him. Not because of the sign language, but because I was startled to see that his pleasure was genuine.

Laurie closed the door, and I studied Maria with interest. She made me think of a hummingbird, so frail and fluttery and bright. It looked as though she’d just come from a party. She wore a red dress and her hair was gathered at the top of her head. Her arms and legs were delicately defined, and she wore heels.

How did she feel about the Seelie Prince?

I had my answer in an instant—Maria adored him. It was obvious in the way she ducked her head, a pleased smile curving her lips. A breath of

jealousy caught in my lungs, making them feel tight.

"…can read lips quite easily, as long as she can see your mouth," Laurie was saying.

I couldn't respond even if I wanted to; the high from using my powers was ending, the crash sudden and devastating. It felt as if someone had pulled a stopper out of me, and what remained of my strength was spilling out. Everything hurt. My stomach was on fire. I sensed Laurie returning to my side, then I was in his arms.

"Gil," I tried to say. His side of the bond was too still. The tiny lights were winking in and out.

"Don't worry about him right now," Laurie said. Then a bed appeared beneath me, and it was everywhere, as fluffy as a cloud. I would've moaned if I wasn't in so much pain.

There was a slight dip in the mattress. A moment later, I felt the faint prickle of magic as Maria started working on the gouges across my stomach. Her touch was firmer than I expected, and she aligned the edges of my skin before aiming her intention into it. Her otherness. I paid attention as much as I was able—the process had always fascinated me. Not the magic part, but the healing.

It was a reminder of the hopes I'd once had for myself, for my own life. I'd wanted to be a healer, too. I had daydreamed about opening my own veterinary clinic someday and adopting more rescue animals. I smiled blearily at this mental image, then I felt myself frown as I thought, *Finn already sheds so much. I better invest in a better vacuum. Maybe a Dyson. I've heard good things about those.*

Maria's low voice sounded near my ear. "Lady Sworn? Can you hear me?"

"I'm awake," I mumbled. Despite how weak I felt, I hadn't lost consciousness. Had I been thinking about… vacuums?

"That's good. Are you able to sit up?"

I nodded, and it seemed like a positive sign that I wasn't hit by a wave of nausea. The healer put her arm around my shoulders, careful not to make contact with our skin. Her scent greeted me as I came out of the darkness. *Rosewater*. I lifted my head, and I spotted Laurie straightaway.

He leaned against the edge of the doorway, watching Maria's administrations. She'd begun searching the rest of my body for injuries. When her fingers prodded my ribs, I noticed she was wearing rubber

gloves. So *that* was why I hadn't been accosted by her fears when she'd touched me.

"Your vampire is improving," Laurie said abruptly, his gaze flitting to mine. As if he'd known I was awake before I did. "I gave him the cooler of blood bags Maria brought. There should be enough for him to complete the transition. I must say, it's remarkable he lasted this long. I've never seen a newborn hold onto their control like that. It's almost as if he has some help."

Though his expression didn't change, I sensed the probing in his comments. The spell I'd performed on Gil wasn't common knowledge amongst the fae—even if Laurie's spies had reported whatever the cameras in that cell captured, there was no definitive way of knowing what sort of magic I had done. Belanor had admitted as much when he asked me about it.

"Tell me about Vulen," I croaked. I wasn't sure why, but the thought of telling Laurie about the bond caused a knot of anxiety to form next to my heart.

Laurie's expression didn't change at this ill-disguised attempt to change the topic. "Ah, so you've met Belanor's favorite lackey," he said. "I'm not surprised. Vulen might not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but he sure is the shiniest. Besides a hot piece of ass, he's the only known telepathic among fae. Well, now that Jassin is dead, at least. He's been very useful to our family over the years."

"I'm guessing that's not the only way you've used him," I remarked. Was that more jealousy I detected? What was *happening* to me?

"Your shoulder is bleeding," Maria murmured before Laurie could answer. She shifted into my line of view. "Will you allow me to remove your shirt, Lady Sworn?"

The room fell silent. I nodded, and Maria pulled the stained, sweat-dampened top over my head. There was no bra underneath. I crossed my arms and fixedly looked at the floor. Laurie pushed off the doorframe and walked over to our side of the bed. He stopped next to Maria, but neither of them said a word. I knew my back was a mess. Now, in addition to the scars from Death Bringer's whip, the brand took up most of the flesh below my right shoulder.

"Not sure why there's blood," I muttered, stopping myself from reaching for the shirt, which was still clutched in Maria's hands. "Iris

tended to it right afterward."

I'd made certain to turn my head when I spoke, ensuring Maria could see my mouth. When the healer finally replied, her voice was even gentler, if that were possible. "I have heard it said, my lady, that it is this way with dark magic. It can make things weep or bleed. Whatever the spell has touched, whether that be an object or person. And I can plainly see that this is the work of dark magic."

"Great," I said weakly. "These… side effects are going to wear off eventually, right?"

Maria made a thoughtful sound that I didn't like at all. Before I could ask her anything else, Laurie moved closer. I stiffened instinctively. There was a soft footstep, and then I felt his fingers brush against my skin. Not on the brand itself, but along its edges. I closed my eyes, knowing he couldn't see it, and let myself enjoy the light touch. Laurie's fears were guarded behind that impenetrable wall again; there was only the warmth of his skin.

"For this, my brother will die," Laurie said finally. His voice was flat. After another moment, his hand fell away. To the healer he said, his hands moving again, "Can it be undone?"

"No. The damage goes too deep. But I can ease any lingering pain she might be feeling and perhaps stop the bleeding altogether."

"Do it."

In my peripheral vision, I saw Laurie retreat. He moved toward the other end of the room, and Maria's hands fluttered over the brand like autumn leaves riding a breeze. I hardly felt them, even when her power filled the wound. As she poured her energy into me, Laurie knelt in front of the fireplace. He began placing wood in the grate, and the pieces made hollow sounds as he stacked them.

Seeing him on his knees, performing a task with his own two hands, made me blink. I half-forgot Maria as I watched him. Though Laurie's movements were as fluid as always, there was something even more alluring about them now. As if he'd done these actions, these gestures so many times that they'd become muscle memory. A dance.

Midway through his task, Laurie shifted and his arm went out of sight. When he resettled, he held a poker.

"Am I hurting you, Lady Sworn?" Maria asked suddenly, and I realized that I was sitting ramrod straight, one of my hands fisted in my lap. The

other hand had crept up, reaching for the brand in an unconscious gesture.

I dropped my gaze, but it was too late—I'd shown them a glimpse of how badly Belanor had harmed me. That the effects of my time with him went far deeper than any burn or cut.

To Maria, though, I just shook my head. Thankfully, she didn't ask any more questions. She resumed the healing process, adjusting her perch on the bed to get closer. Every now and then, I felt the faerie's breath, a faint gust of air that warmed my skin. Once it felt like the tension in the room had eased, I dared to peek toward Laurie again. The tension in the room may have eased, but Laurie's hadn't. His eyes promised his brother an even slower death. I tried not to shiver, and I wasn't entirely sure if I was feeling arousal or fear. Maybe a little of both.

Standing there, firelight and darkness flickering across his face, Laurelis Dondarte looked like the dangerous creature he truly was.

"You can't kill everyone I'm afraid of, you know," I joked weakly, trying to lighten the moment.

Laurie's voice was soft, and there was no trace of the teasing I'd hoped to see. "Watch me," he said.

This time I did shiver. Seeing it, Laurie's gaze darkened again. I didn't respond, but I knew those faerie senses of his could detect physical signs of how much he'd rattled me. Laurie just looked back, his gaze steady and unrepentant.

Then I blinked, and it was as if a spell lifted from us—Laurie turned to the fire and I stared at my hands. Maria hadn't faltered, in spite of the strange conversation she'd been privy to. Or maybe she'd completely missed it. Her power continued to pool inside the brand, creating a sensation similar to springtime sunlight. I focused on that, and tried not to listen to the sounds Laurie was making. Minutes later, he left the room without a word. All the stiffness left my body, and I almost let out an audible breath of relief. I waited for Maria to make a comment or a pointed observation, the way every faerie did, because they just couldn't help themselves.

The healer didn't say a word.

By the time she finished tending to me, a vibrant fire crackled in the grate and night crowded all around. Maria had turned on every lamp in the room, but the corners had become pockets of deep shadow. Laurie hadn't come back.

“It has been an honor to heal you this evening, Lady Sworn,” Maria said, bending to retrieve her bag. I reached for my shirt, which now reeked of terror and blood, and pulled it quickly over my head.

I waited until she looked up again to answer. I touched my chin with the tips of my fingers, then lowered my hand in her direction, palm-up. “Thank you, Maria. Really. I’m pretty sure you saved my life. I hope I can repay you one day.”

“You already have, my lady,” the healer replied. When I gave her a questioning look, she smiled. It was a big, genuine smile, revealing her dimples and the slight gap between her two front teeth. *She’s absolutely beautiful*, I thought as she continued, “One of my cousins was a slave at the Unseelie Court. There was nothing we could do, since she lost her freedom in a foolish bargain. My family has despaired for years, thinking we would never see her again. But then, a few weeks ago… she came home to us. All the slaves had been freed by the Nightmare Queen, she told us.

“It has been an honor to heal you,” Maria said again, with an air of finality. “Your bill is paid in full.”

With that, she bowed her head and walked through the open door. I watched her go, feeling lighter than I had in months. I was always carrying the weight of my mistakes and all the bad things I’d done; I liked knowing that, at least once along the way, I’d done something good instead.

A moment later, Maria’s voice came from the foyer. Laurie’s deeper voice responded. Their voices were too low to hear. I sat on the bed, and I was about to get up when I finally absorbed the absence of pain. I was still weary and fragmented, but I felt the calmest I had in days. Getting free of Belanor

For the first time since Laurie had carried me in here, I took in the details of the room around me.

It was obvious, now that I wasn’t so distracted, that this was where he slept. His subtle, enticing scent clung to everything. The walls were made of dark, wooden panels. Medieval-looking wall sconces had been installed on several of them. There was a looming, framed mirror leaning against one wall—typical—and two leather reading chairs in front of the other. The four-poster bed was exactly what I’d imagined Laurie sleeping in… not that I had ever spent time imagining where he slept. A patterned red rug rested on the wooden floor.

Maria and Laurie had gone silent, presumably because the healer had left. The stillness rang. *Gil*, I thought. He must've finished the transition by now.

Worried again, I crept out of the room, instinctively trying to make as little sound as possible. Maria was gone and the doors were closed, the lock turned. Quivering firelight poured from a wide, open doorway to my right. Laurie was in there; I could see his silhouette on the floor, stretching toward the foyer. The beginnings of soft piano notes rippled through the dark.

I started toward him when I detected the faint smell of blood coming from one of the other rooms. Turning left, I moved to the one that was tightly shut with no light coming from the narrow crack beneath the door. The bond strengthened with every step, and I knew I had the right room. I knocked as gently as I could.

"Gil? Are you okay?" I asked softly, putting my mouth close to the door.

The vampire didn't answer. Now my concern overpowered my sense of decency, and I probed the bond between us. Gil's side was covered in shadow, like a bat enclosed in its dark wings. A wary prickle raced over my skin, and I backed away.

When I heard a floorboard creak beyond that dark door, I hurried into the room where Laurie was.

It was a living room, of sorts. More accurately, it was a room that didn't know what it wanted to be. The space was long and narrow, rather than square. On the far end, there was a baby grand piano in front of a wide window. A cluster of settees and chairs stood in the center. And closest to me, there was a poker table, surrounded by four thick-cushioned chairs.

Laurie sat at the piano.

It was only when I looked at him that I remembered I was wearing ruined scrubs; Laurie looked glamorous as ever. The bastard wasn't even trying, either. He must've showered and changed while I'd been with Maria—his hair, which was shorter than it had been before Belanor abducted me, fell into his eyes in damp, glimmering strands. He wasn't wearing a shirt, only dark jeans that hung low on his hips. I'd never seen Laurie in jeans before, and yet they looked as natural on him as a fur cape did. The lines of his body were lean and elegant.

I finished crossing the room and stopped beside the piano. The song he played was like nothing I had heard before. It made me think of thick forests and curling mist, regal mountains and gray clouds. I couldn't bring myself to interrupt. I couldn't stop watching Laurie's hands move over the keys.

The piece ended in a soft way, as if the story it was telling had concluded on a gray note. Laurie's long fingers stroked the patterned, rich wood. There was fondness in the curve of his mouth, as if he were looking at an old friend.

"I would've guessed the guitar," I said.

His gaze scanned the length of me, the twist to his lips more clinical than sensual, and yet I still found myself staring at them. Remembering what they'd felt like atop that imaginary mountaintop. Tasted like.

"Since it appears we'll be spending more time here, you're welcome to use the shower and borrow a nightgown," Laurie offered, getting to his feet. For once, he was completely unaware of my thoughts. Moonlight shone over the hard planes of his stomach, and it took me an extra beat to raise my gaze as he continued, "I keep extra nightwear around for my frequent… guests. I should warn you, though, most of them could technically be considered lingerie."

"In that case, I probably shouldn't. I think we've both had enough excitement for one day." I spoke without thinking. Less than a second later I realized what I'd said, what I had hinted at. Heat rushed to my cheeks.

The Seelie King—the *true* Seelie King—studied me more intensely. Then he apparently misinterpreted my silence for discomfort, because he walked around me and headed for the foyer. "Before my mother interrupted us, you were about to tell me why Belanor has taken such an interest in you," Laurie said without turning.

I followed him into the room across from the one we'd just left. I did want to take him up on the invitation to shower, but I wasn't about to miss an opportunity to ask some of the questions burning in my mind.

This space was smaller and brighter, the shadows banished by lights and a fireplace. There was a huge bar along one wall, with wooden columns and carved edges, the shelves behind it lit up to display the long rows of bottles. The rest of the room was dedicated to various seating, the upholstery ranging from green brocade or striped cream and gold. It all had the feel of a speakeasy, somehow.

“I don’t know,” I answered at last, sliding onto one of the barstools while Laurie slipped behind the counter. “What I do know is that he’ll want me back—badly. There was some kind of spell he planned to do, and he needed a powerful Nightmare to complete it. Belanor tried it with Gil, and that’s how he died.”

The backdrop behind the shelves of liquor was a long mirror, and I watched my reflection as I talked about Gil. There was a haunted cast to my eyes.

“Preparations for Belanor’s coronation are being made as we speak. He’s already getting what he wants,” Laurie murmured, more to himself than me, I thought. His finger tapped the bar absently. “What else could he possibly want that he’d resort to dark spells for it?”

I lifted my head and gave a weary shrug. “He never told me. Now that I’ve answered some of your questions, will you please share how we’re going to pull off this daring escape?”

Laurie raised his brows and set down a bottle of whiskey. He lifted a sleek glass to his lips, half-full with amber liquid, and took a savory, leisurely drink. After he’d swallowed Laurie said, casual as could be, “Why, Miss Sworn, I thought you would’ve figured it out by now. We’re going to walk right out the front door.”

CHAPTER TEN

For the next hour, I pressed Laurie for answers.

I tried to find out more about our escape, where Finn was, why Laurie had said that *we* were going to the fundraiser, and a dozen other gaps in my knowledge. But he dodged every question with the skill of a faerie and the charm of a prince. He asked some questions of his own, distracting me, dancing around me as if we actually were standing in a ballroom, our battlefield made of gleaming floors and glittering chandeliers instead of mud and smoke-smeared skies.

"Would you like a drink? Wait, no, I suppose that would be a bad idea while you're still dehydrated. You Nightmares are as delicate as humans sometimes, I swear."

"Are you sore after the healing? Shall I send for the royal masseuse? Their name is Avery and I swear there's something supernatural about those fingers."

"You're certain you're not hungry? I could call my assistant. She'll probably slaughter us both for waking her at this hour, but she'd at least bring food with her. She's nothing if not efficient."

"Would you like a tour of the suite? It'll save you the trouble of snooping later."

This last question was how we ended up back in Laurie's bedroom again. I'd been trailing after him everywhere he went. Watching Laurie in his own space was riveting, to say the least. He moved from task to task, topic to topic like a butterfly within a field of wildflowers. Making a drink, looking for a book, sending a text. All the while he verbally sparred with me as if it were effortless, focusing on multiple things at once.

Eventually, though, my fascination gave way to frustration.

"What *is* it with you?" I demanded. I was on the bed, where I'd sat with an exasperated sigh as he went to the dresser. "Do all faeries just get off on keeping everyone around them in the dark?"

Maybe Laurie heard the true note of aggravation in my voice; he turned from the dresser and came to kneel in front of me. Behind him, the fire made a popping sound. Sparks flared and faded into the quiet, casting an orange gleam over Laurie's shoulders. "Would you like a bedtime story, Your Majesty?" he murmured.

I frowned at him, wondering why he'd gotten on his knees. "Sure," I snapped. "Tell me a goddamn bedtime story while an innocent man is possibly dying in the dungeon."

Ignoring this, Laurie began massaging my calf. I snatched my leg back instinctively. He just plucked it away from the baseboard and resumed kneading, sliding his fingers up my pantleg to massage bare skin. "Once upon a time, there was a young prince," Laurie said. "He was the firstborn son of a great ruler, which meant that he always knew what his future looked like. He spent all his days striving to become worthy of it. He shaped his very identity around it, in fact, becoming so obsessed with meeting expectations that he stopped thinking about things like mercy or kindness. He believed being a strong king would bring him love, you see. Not only the love of his people, but also the love of his family, as well. Eventually he gave up on that silly dream. By then, however, it was too late to become someone else. He continued to trade in secrets and strategies. He filled his time with bargains and games. Until, one day, he met someone who reminded him of what he'd forgotten. Of what he had allowed himself to forget.

"Come, I'll show you where the towels are," Laurie said, finally setting my leg down.I blinked at the abrupt ending, the whiplash change of topic. "Is that it? That's the story?"

But Laurie was already up and striding to the door. I swallowed another sigh and followed him once again. He led me toward the bathroom as if I hadn't already seen it. There was one thing I hadn't seen, though—there was a narrow section of wall between the two doors, and as we passed, I finally noticed the picture frames hanging there. I faltered, staring at them, and my annoyance slowly faded.

It was the first thing about Laurie that seemed completely normal. Human. Though the frames were as stylish and tasteful as I'd expect of him, the pictures themselves were ordinary. Snapshots of his past, his memories. Several were black and white. There was one of Laurie atop a horse, shining bright amongst a hunting party. Another was Laurie and Lensa in what looked like the 1920s, sitting at a table in a club, both holding cocktails aloft.

I kept looking, and my gaze latched onto one of the faces peering back at me. It felt like my heart held its breath. *Collith.*

It was the first time I'd seen his face without the scar. I stared at the grainy image, and even now, after everything that had happened or gone wrong, I was drawn to him. This version of Collith seemed less… burdened than the one I knew now. His smile was wider. His posture was relaxed.

Was all of that because of the faerie who stood at his side?

It was obvious Collith and Laurie had been at the palace when this picture was taken—I recognized one of the hallways we'd stolen down tonight. But they stood there in the light of day, arms slung around each other's shoulders, grinning at the camera like they had a secret no one else would ever know. They wore the clothing of fae courtiers, making it impossible to discern the year this was from.

I whirled, pressing my finger to the glass. Laurie stood in the doorway to the bathroom, watching me. "What is this?" I demanded. "It was obviously taken here at the palace. He… he made it seem as though you met while he was living among humans."

"And so we did. After a few months, Collith returned with me to the Seelie Court. He and Naevys lived here, as my guests."

"What happened? Why did they…" The question faded in my throat as I realized I already knew the answer to that particular mystery. Collith and Laurie had had sex for the first time, and the Seelie King's reaction to learning his lover's dark secret had been as explosive as mine. Undoubtedly fearing for their lives, Naevys took Collith back to the Unseelie Court and pleaded for Sylvyre's protection.

I wondered what sort of price she'd paid to get it. When faeries were involved, especially faerie kings, nothing was free.

My arms were crossed, my shoulders hunched, as if I could shield myself from the memory of Naevys's last moments. I stared at Collith's

young, smiling face for another moment or two, then backed away, wincing from a tight sensation in my chest. Pain. It was pain. Like it or not, I had fallen in love with Collith Sylvyre. Seeing his face was another reminder of all I had lost. Of everything I'd never really had to begin with.

Laurie left the question dangling between us. He moved out of sight, going deeper into the bathroom. I peeled away from the pictures and followed, wondering if this night would ever end.

"Towels are there. Nightgowns are in the bottom drawer." The faerie prince's demeanor had become brisk. He stopped beside a thick glass wall and gestured to a screen nestled in the stone wall opposite us. "The shower is fairly self-explanatory. The panel has buttons to turn it on and off. You also adjust the temperature and the pressure with it. Would you like me to show you?" There was a thinly-veiled suggestion in his offer.

I was so excited at the prospect of showering that I didn't react. "I think I'll be okay. Thank you."

Winking, Laurie pushed off the glass. He didn't look back as he ambled toward the door, and a moment later, it closed with a firm sound.

I didn't waste any time getting the scrubs off. I left them in an abandoned pile, resolving to throw those stained clothes in the garbage the first chance I got. My bare feet made a slapping sound against the tiles as I went to stand in front of the screen. It woke up at the slightest touch, and just as Laurie said, the options were self-explanatory. I pressed the one that held a power symbol, and water instantly came down from above.

My lips parted, and I exhaled a long breath of exaltation.

Laurelis Dondarte might have been an arrogant, scheming, murderous faerie, but he had a damn good shower.

I closed my eyes, reveling in the sensation of hot water pounding down on me. For a while, I had no sense of time.

Eventually I opened my eyes again, albeit reluctantly, and returned my attention to the screen. Beneath the panel, there was a place to put my hand, and the press of a button released the body wash, shampoo, and conditioner I needed to feel clean again. Taking longer than necessary, I scrubbed the fear, blood, sweat, and pain off my body. Bubbles and rivers of white circled the drain beneath the rain shower.

Steam rolled past me as I stepped out of the shower minutes later. I dried myself off with the oversized white towels resting on a nearby shelf.

After a brief internal battle, I reached for the drawer Laurie had indicated earlier.

His extra nightgowns were, indeed, negligee.

I stared down at them and let out a breath. I could wear something from Laurie's dresser, but he hadn't offered and it would've felt strange, anyway. But it was either this or the revolting scrubs. Relenting, I rummaged through the options and selected the least revealing one, which wasn't saying much. I dropped the towel and pulled the nightie over my head. It was the color of a plum, with black lace that cut across my upper thighs and dipped low on my back.

If Laurie hadn't saved my life several times over, I'd kill him.

I had just started the search for a toothbrush when I happened to glance at myself in the mirror. It felt like it had been weeks since I'd looked at my own reflection. Those age-old instincts struck first, to dislike the person gazing back. But allowing those feelings to take root was part of the reason everything had gone so wrong. Maybe I wouldn't have asked Cyrus to make me human, if I'd tried to understand myself better before reaching that point. I studied the young woman who resembled my mother. I fought not to fear her or turn away.

Okay, I'd been in here long enough. I needed to brush my teeth and get some sleep.

I shook myself and continued the search. The third drawer that I opened held exactly what I needed—toothpaste, floss, and several toothbrushes still in unopened plastic cases. *Classy*, I thought, too tired to even roll my eyes. I freed one of the brushes and reached for the toothpaste. Even the act of getting ready for bed made me feel steadier, calmer. It was the first normal experience I'd had in days.

Minutes after that, my body clean and my mouth tasting like mint, I finally turned off the light in the bathroom and stepped into the foyer. I found myself in instant darkness; other than Laurie's room, from which there came a gentle glow, everywhere else was shrouded in night.

I headed for that flickering glow. I faltered on the threshold when I saw Laurie was in the bed. He sat upright, hands folded behind his head. The ridges of his stomach gleamed and his eyes glittered as he thoroughly examined the nightgown I'd borrowed.

"Where should I sleep?" I asked, my mind already picturing the sofa I'd seen in another room.

“How much money would it take to spare us from an argument you’re too tired for and I’ll win anyway? I may not be a king anymore, but I’m no pauper.” Laurie raised his brows and waited, practically thrumming with vitality.

I heaved a sigh and climbed into the bed, my knees sinking into the plush sheets. Laurie must’ve changed them while I was in the bathroom, because I faintly remembered bleeding on the other ones before Maria sealed the gouges across my stomach shut.

Taking advantage of the silence, my mind turned to the list of questions I’d been accumulating for days. Weeks.

“Before I forget to ask again,” I said, aiming for the unoccupied side of the mattress, “why the hell was *Nym* there when you performed that scrying spell? And how did you get *Mercy Wardwell* to help?”

As I tucked my legs beneath the covers, I glanced over and saw Laurie’s eyes darken at the memory. It wasn’t my favorite one, either. An image snapped at me like the strike of a venomous snake, and I saw Laurie kneeling in front of me, mist swirling all around us. *I’m coming for you, Fortuna. I give you my solemn vow.*

“I’m surprised you remember that,” Laurie said now, raking his hair back. The gesture drew my attention to the defined lines of his arm. The cadence of his voice took on a briskness, as if he were giving me a report. “You and the wolf were taken from the hospital, and all Paynore could say was that it had been cherubim. Not very helpful, as far as finding you was concerned, since I hadn’t known cherubim were even in this dimension until a few weeks ago.

“Luckily, you’d left your phone in your bedroom before you asked the dragon to flay you alive. I knew the passcode, of course. That’s when I saw the messages you’d sent Mercy. I’d been searching for a witch we could trust to do a scrying spell—most of the ones in my employ cut ties with me when the tomb spell took effect—and she seemed like a viable option. She responded quickly enough when I reached out to her. As for Nym, he arrived at the house at the exact time we’d all agreed to meet, and he sat at the table as if he’d received an invitation to be there. He was one of the energy sources Mercy pulled from while she scried, so really, it was fortunate he showed up.”

I absorbed this information while I eased my body down. Maybe Mercy felt guiltier than she let on about abandoning us the night we

opened Creiddylad's tomb. But why would Nym show up? Had Collith sent him? Did that mean my ex had gotten free of Viessa?

"Why did it take you so long after the spell? Not that I'm complaining," I added hastily. "I'm just trying to fill in the gaps. Being in that cell was like… like being in a place where time didn't exist."

Laurie's mouth tightened, and I knew, somehow, that it was in reaction to hearing the shift in my voice. The vulnerability I usually fought so hard to hide.

Maybe he answered my question because he felt sorry for me. If that was the case, I'd still take it.

"When you said Belanor's name, I assumed you would be in one of the cells beneath the palace," Laurie said, meeting my gaze. "But only the heir or the Queen Regent has the authority to access the prisoners, much less set any of them free. Information about them is also highly confidential, as well. I used my connections to confirm your presence, and then I followed the other breadcrumbs Belanor had dropped along his way to the throne. I soon discovered that he'd resurrected the Games, a practice I'd abolished long before I was even king. I attended just a few hours later, intending to bargain with Belanor for your freedom, and then I saw you down on the sand."

Now Laurie's voice had changed, too. Suddenly I was back in the arena, staring up at the silver prince as if he were a brightly shining star. I hadn't known that Laurie was afraid, but as he remembered that moment, there were faint wisps of it in the room with us. Surrounding him. Teasing me.

"Once the fight was over, and you were carried out of there unconscious, I immediately began work on your escape. I obtained a blueprint of the passageways and reviewed the routes myself. This eventually led me into the cherubim den, which I decided to use to our advantage. You know the rest. Well, the significant bits, anyway," Laurie added. "There was a lot of other planning involved, too, like guard shifts and distractions. Turning the cameras off and getting identification for the elevator, that sort of thing. If there were an award for heist planning, I would obviously be a recipient."

I made an absent sound. "There's one thing I don't understand… well, there are a lot of things I don't understand, actually, but one thing that's been bugging me since your mother left. You went to all that effort to hide

your part in my escape, Laur. You were willing to endanger our lives to hide it. If it's that important, why on earth would you go to a ball with me? Sorry to break it you, but no mask is going to hide your identity."

"You're not thinking like a faerie, Sworn. I went to 'all that effort,' as you say, because anyone caught helping a prisoner escape is subject to the old laws. I was simply covering my own ass, because it's quite a nice ass and I'm very fond of it." I opened my mouth to launch into my next round of questions when Laurie spoke over me. "If it *did* somehow become public knowledge that a prisoner had gotten free, and it was also learned you were that prisoner, of course it would be natural to see us together at the event and assume I'd played a part in everything. But it can't be proved, and that is what matters at the Seelie Court. I can't be linked to Fortuna Sworn, the prisoner. Therefore, I am free to attend as the Seelie Prince, and why shouldn't I bring a guest? It is a party, after all. We'll dally for a bit, see and be seen, and then you'll make your departure. Simple."

We both knew it wouldn't be that easy.

"What do you get out of it? Why be there at all?" I asked bluntly.

Laurie sighed. "There are several reasons. The first of which being that, should my brother make an appearance, he will not be able to claim you while you are on another male's arm. I could ask one of my associates to be your escort, if you'd prefer, though they probably won't deter Belanor or any other ambitious courtiers in that room. Lensa may not keep up with current events, but the same cannot be said for the rest of this gossipy bunch—they'll know about what happened at Viessa's coup."

Meaning everyone knew I'd dumped Collith. Like it or not, my relationship with him had provided a small amount of protection.

I was still deep in thought when my attention landed on Laurie again. It took longer than it should have to realize he was staring at my cleavage. I felt my mouth part, but nothing came out. He dragged his eyes up to mine, unsmiling. His arm was still raised over his head, lending tension to the rest of his hard body, and as the seconds ticked past, I could see Laurie's breathing shift in the rise and fall of his sculpted stomach. A sensation went through me, deep and sensual. It left a trail of unrest in its wake.

"Stay over there, if you know what's good for you," I warned finally, grateful that I sounded unaffected by the heat in that long look.

“I do know what’s good for me, yes,” Laurie agreed.

The statement felt unfinished, somehow, as if invisible words were floating through the air. I shot him another halfhearted glare, then pulled the covers over me. They were heavenly against my skin, and I let out another sigh, this one made of pure relief. With Laurie next to me, his scent all around, I felt… safe.

But there was someone important to me who didn’t get to feel that way. Right now he was probably scared and alone. The moment I closed my eyes, I saw Finn’s face.

Then I thought of Gil, who was becoming something I didn’t fully understand. I could still feel the sensations pulsing from his side of the bond, and they felt like… death.

“Your story,” I said abruptly, staring up at the vaulted ceiling. Laurie turned onto his side, and I did the same without thinking. It was instinctive. Involuntary. As if Laurie had caught hold of something inside me and held the other end in his grasp, tugging it with his every word and movement. His expression was fathomless, not because of the dimness of the room, but due to the careful blankness he now wore. I stared at the firelight flickering along the edge of his face, thinking for the hundredth time about how beautiful Laurie truly was. I forgot, sometimes, and it would hit me all over again, as it was in this moment.

He was still waiting for me to finish the question I’d started. Now I wasn’t sure I wanted to, but I knew it would haunt me. “Was it about him?” I made myself say.

Laurie didn’t ask who I meant. “Actually, the prince in that particular story was me,” he said.

He didn’t expand upon this, and it was obvious he didn’t want to talk about it anymore. I thought about what he’d told me. It had been a glimpse, however small, of Laurie’s real life. A look behind the velvet curtain. *He traded in secrets and strategies. Until, one day, he met someone who reminded him of what he’d forgotten. Of what he had allowed himself to forget.*

Had Laurie been talking about Collith? Or… me?

It was the only question I left unspoken. Laurie and I lay there, both of us breathing so quietly that I couldn’t hear even the faintest wisps of air. The fire burned low in the hearth. Now and then, it gave a halfhearted crackle.

“How is my kitten?” I whispered. I wasn’t sure why I suddenly felt the need to lower my voice, but it still felt loud in the stillness. I pictured the small creature I’d been forced to leave behind. I’d barely had any time with him before the cherubim captured me. I hadn’t even gotten to name him.

“He’s a cheeky bastard,” Laurie muttered back. “Ruined my favorite pair of pants yesterday.”

The corners of my mouth twitched. “How did you end up owning an animal shelter, anyway?”

Laurie rolled onto his back, moving his arm so it pillowed his head. His chest moved, as if he were sighing again, but I didn’t hear the sound of an exhale.

“After…” He fell silent. There was something about Laurie’s pause that told me he was unable, or unwilling, to say Collith’s name in this moment. It was the exact thing I kept doing. There was no logic in our tactics—if I’d learned anything these past few weeks, it was that not acknowledging something didn’t make it fade or weaken. In fact, it was the opposite. Keeping something in the dark only allowed it to fester and swell.

Avoiding the name only gives it more power. Collith had said that to me once. My life was nothing if not ironic.

“After Collith left,” Laurie said, speaking more firmly, “I needed a distraction. I wanted to stay busy. I searched for floundering nonprofits and invested in them. Got them running again.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Running a kingdom wasn’t enough?”

“Not this time.”

Laurie kept his gaze on the ceiling, his strong, aristocratic profile dark with a solemnity that looked strange on him. I forced my focus away from his beauty and mulled over his words. *Distraction. Busy.* So that was how Laurie dealt with his pain. For decades, every time he’d encountered conflict or disappointment, he’d focused on his Court. His politics. His position. No wonder he was so good at playing the game. It was his safe place, just as the dreamscape was mine. We all had a way of coping, and I’d just learned Laurie’s.

“Not to mention it was good for my image,” he added lightly, flashing me a crooked grin. It was as if he’d heard my thoughts again. For the hundredth time, I fortified the wall that protected my mind.

Once I was certain it was impenetrable, I frowned at Laurie. “Don’t do that. Don’t dismiss the good you’ve done and pretend it didn’t matter.”

“It matters, Fortuna. I never said it didn’t matter.” His grin was gone now, and I got the feeling that we were talking about something else. Then Laurie added, as if he couldn’t stand to be serious for any extended length of time, “I also like how the humans worship the ground I walk on every time I stop by.”

Normally I’d say something to cut Laurie down, bring him back to Earth amongst the rest of us lowly creatures, but not tonight. For the past few days, I had done nothing but survive. React. Fight. Iris and Maria may have healed my body, but my mind had to mend on its own. Right now, all I wanted was the sweet oblivion of sleep. I wasn’t sure why I hadn’t succumbed to it yet. I suspected it had nothing to do with the strange setting I was in and everything to do with the faerie that rested beside me. Laurie was a being that was ever-moving, always plotting, and never staying. Other than the day we’d spent reading Kindreth’s journals, I hadn’t had a chance to voice the questions rattling around in my head like a box of broken toys.

“How did it work? When you… stopped being king?” I asked lamely, wincing as I heard the words out loud. I’d been about to say, *When you lost your throne*. But Laurie hadn’t lost his throne, it had been taken from him. Because of me.

Just as I’d feared, his brow lowered; Laurie didn’t like talking about this. Surprisingly, though, he didn’t evade the question. “I walked into that tomb, and at first, I felt nothing,” he said, still focusing on the ceiling. I looked up at it, too, as if I could see the scene playing out while he described it. “I was expecting to feel the magic, like a wall or a rush of nausea. But the spell is more subtle than that. There’s nothing stopping anyone from actually entering the passage. Just a… quiet voice in your head, a sense that you don’t want to go any farther. It felt ancient. So ancient that I found myself cowering like a boy again. It inquired after the thing I treasured most. Loved the most. At that moment, I was powerless, and I pictured my throne. All those years of study, all those years of learning discipline, and a spell overpowered me in seconds.

“When I got back to Court, the palace was calmer than I thought it would be. I’d braced myself for chaos and panic, but courtiers just scurried past me like little mice. They wouldn’t even look in my direction. There

was no great event or huge catastrophe to explain it. It was more of an unspoken understanding. My dethroning was treated like an… embarrassment. Like I'd been fired from a job." There was still a faint note of bafflement in Laurie's voice. As if, even now, he couldn't quite believe it had happened.

Hearing that sent a ripple of guilt through me. Laurie sighed and concluded, "Mab arrived at the palace soon after that. Until Belanor takes the throne, she is Regent once again. It's as if the last seventy years didn't happen and I'm a child again."

I knew Laurie wasn't saying any of this to fill me with regret, but it did. I bit my lip, wishing that I'd done things differently the night we'd confronted Gwyn at the tomb. Maybe the spell would've taken my powers, which I had gone on to do myself anyway. Once again, I couldn't think of what to say. After a minute I went with, "I'm sorry, Laurie. I'm so sorry."

They were the same words Collith had used when he'd apologized to me. The same tone. The same inadequacy.

All traces of grief left Laurie's face, and suddenly my roguish friend was looking back at me. "Don't be ridiculous, please," he said lightly. "Now, shall I be the big spoon?"

So many emotions went through me that they felt like a flock of birds flapping across a wide expanse of sky—fear, gratitude, more guilt. I held the edge of the pillow tighter, and my voice was soft as I said, "Thank you, Laurie. For coming for me."

He either heard my sincerity or sensed the shift within me, because his eyes burned like silver fire. He looked over at me, and suddenly the distance I'd put between us felt like nothing. "I will always come for you," he said.

I waited, expecting one of his usual endings to a serious statement. But Laurie was silent; his gaze dropped and lingered on my mouth. We were at the edge of something, I thought as my own gaze lowered, looking at his mouth, too. Possibility hovered in the shadows around us. Potential. Heat.

Then my thoughts began to trickle into the silence.

A few weeks ago, I'd been in a motel room with Collith, facing him on the bed exactly as Laurie and I were doing now. That night, I had opened a door in my heart to the Unseelie King. I had made a choice, albeit unknowingly, that would lead to blood, death, and pain.

Laurie didn’t move toward me, but I sensed the tension coiling in that hard, capable body. He lay nestled amongst his cream-colored sheets like a god, his skin and hair gleaming a tarnished gold from the nearby hearth. I wanted him—I couldn’t deny that anymore. Not that I’d been doing a great job of it until now.

But in our violent, magical world, the things we desired tended to be our undoing.

“Good night,” I said finally.

Laurie didn’t say it back. I hesitated, then rolled over onto my other side, turning my back on temptation. I still felt the subtle press of Laurie’s attention; his eyes lingered on the network of scars that covered me like a map. Every mark represented the recklessness and chaos that brought me to this moment, this bed. I may have gotten my powers back, but I wasn’t the person who had asked a dragon to burn them away. I wanted to be someone better. Someone worthy of forgiveness.

I closed my eyes and saw a flash of the place that was waiting for me. White-tipped waves, rustling green leaves. I hadn’t thought of Oliver all day, but now I filled my mind with him. I didn’t think of anything—or anyone—else.

It took longer than it should have. By the time I slipped through the crack between worlds, Laurie’s breathing had deepened into sleep. The sound followed me for a second or two.

Then I heard nothing but the wind.

Oliver’s voice came to me before I’d fully arrived in the dreamscape.

“We should leave now. We have a hike ahead of us. Lots of hills.”

I opened my eyes slowly, and discovered that my head was tipped back. I was standing beneath our tree, the sight of it so familiar that it had an instant soothing effect. Through the leaves and branches, a black sky looked back, cold and distant. Strange—it was never nighttime when I came here. Sometimes the stars came out as the hours wore on, or if Oliver coaxed them into being, but never when I first opened my eyes.

Even stranger than the sky, though, was Oliver himself. He stood a few yards away, watching me with an expression I’d never seen before. It was

polite, patient, as if we were strangers. His golden hair stirred in a gust of wind. The white T-shirt was gone, and my best friend looked prepared for a camping trip. He wore hardy-looking boots and a thick coat. A backpack rested against his spine, along with a tightly-rolled sleeping bag. A pile of items rested at his feet. I drew closer and saw they were duplicates of everything Oliver had. Boots, coat, backpack, and a sleeping bag.

"I thought you said you can't manifest things anymore," I remarked.

Oliver bent and picked up the backpack by its top strap. He stepped closer and held it out to me. "Actually, I said I can't manifest things with a single thought. I can if I have a few hours on my hands."

"Exactly how far *is* this mysterious thing you want to show me?" I asked as I accepted it from him.

I'd become too accustomed to faeries and their tendency to avoid direct answers, because I blinked when Oliver said, "Ten miles, give or take. We should be able to do it tonight. I got farther than that when I left, but I changed my mind about the direction I'd taken. If I hadn't, I probably never would've found it."

"Found what?" I asked, hoping Oliver would answer without thinking. He just quirked an eyebrow at me as if to say, *Nice try*. Well, it was worth a shot.

At that moment, the wind strengthened. I looked down at the white sundress I wore. It flapped against me, too feeble against the brisk air. My gaze fell on the pile of supplies Oliver had manifested for me, and there was a set of clothing between the coat and boots. He'd thought of everything.

I lifted my head to tell him I needed to change, but he'd already turned his back, offering me the guise of privacy. I moved quickly, pulling the hiking pants on beneath my dress, then yanking the dress off to replace it with the long-sleeved shirt and coat. Next came the socks and boots, and a stocking cap to complete the transformation.

"Ready?" Oliver said, turning his head so I'd hear him.

Hesitating, I wrapped my fingers around the straps against my shoulders. I wanted to comment on the strangeness of all this—the dark sky, the shifting rules, the fact that we were leaving—but I still wasn't sure how to act around Oliver. Maybe he liked the strangeness. He'd been trapped in a place of sameness all these years, and now he was finally breaking free.

“Ready as I’ll ever be, I guess,” I said eventually.

Oliver turned around. He looked me over and then came closer. Without a word, my best friend reached to adjust the tightness of one of the straps. I found myself looking up at him instead of down at what he was doing. Our faces were inches apart. I studied the faint freckles over the bridge of Oliver’s nose, oddly reassured by them. So much else had changed, but at least there were some constants, however small they may be.

Once the backpack rested against me more securely, Oliver straightened, thankfully unaware of my scrutiny. “There’s a water bottle in the bag, and some snacks if you get hungry,” he said.

I just nodded, trying to hide a creeping sense of anxiety. It surrounded my thoughts like strands of ivy. *You’re being ridiculous,* I told myself. *This is all happening inside your own head. There’s nothing to be scared of.*

That wasn’t entirely true, though. I stole a glance toward the statue of Oliver’s doppelgänger, remembering that terrifying night it attacked me. Maybe there was some validity to my worry.

I didn’t voice any of this to Oliver, though. Not so long ago, I wouldn’t have hesitated to tell him anything, but in addition to all the other changes, there was a strange distance between us now. Physical distance, too, I realized as I registered that I had fallen behind. I hurried after Oliver, disarmed by the sensation of boots on my feet instead of going barefoot.

With that, we set off like two characters in a story, leaving behind everything familiar and comfortable. We passed the winged statue, looming in front of the glittering sea like a monster from the deep. Oliver didn’t look at it, and I averted my gaze quickly, suppressing a shudder. We walked by the place where our cottage used to be.

Only a few yards beyond that was where the ground began to slope upward. It was fortunate the grass wasn’t wet with dew, or it probably would’ve been impossible to climb. Oliver and I ascended the first hill, then the next, and a third one after that. We’d passed the invisible line that I had never crossed before, even when we were children and often spent our nights together exploring this dream world. It felt… unnatural, venturing into the unknown. Almost as if there was a silent, unseen presence urging me to go back. I pushed onward, more out of rebellion than any real desire to see whatever Oliver had stumbled across. We got so

far from the cliffside that the sea shrank, and shrank, and shrank, until it looked like nothing more than a shiny sliver.

At the top of a particularly enormous hill, my thighs burning from exertion, I finally allowed myself to slow and look back. The clouds had parted, allowing some moonlight to shine down on everything. My lips parted in silent awe.

I hadn't realized how vast the dreamscape was. How wild. It stretched as far as the eye could see in both directions, and from this distance, the sea looked endless, too. I turned, wondering what else I might be able to see. So far, we'd mostly been hugging the coastline and heading south. In the other direction, there were forests. Thick, dark forests that looked as unwelcoming as a Grimm fairy tale would describe.

This place had always felt small to me, but now I wasn't sure how I ever believed that.

As I stood there, a new problem occurred to me. Oliver had appeared at my side, staring out at the view expressionlessly. "When I fall asleep, I always arrive next to the oak tree," I told him, frowning. The wind tugged at our hair. "If we don't make it tonight, does that mean we have to start over tomorrow night? Walk all this way again?"

A strand of hair blew into the corner of my mouth, and I pulled it out. Oliver was silent for a moment. A line deepened between his brows and his eyes moved away. Then he grabbed my shoulders and turned me east, toward another night-darkened horizon.

"See that mountain range?" Oliver said in my ear. He waited until I nodded; the range was barely perceptible, but the moon was just bright enough that I could make out a line. I shifted, turning slightly, and my backside brushed against the front of Oliver's pants. He paused for a beat before he continued, "When you fall asleep tomorrow night, picture that in your mind."

I traced the range with my eyes, again and again, memorizing it. "How do you know that will work?"

His fingers loosened, and then fell away. Even though I wore a thick coat, it felt as if I'd lost something, and a shiver went through me. "I don't," Oliver answered. "But I do know that your mind responds to chants, or repetition."

My thoughts filled with Gil and Daratrine. "Intention," I murmured, turning around.

Oliver must've heard something in my voice, because the corners of his mouth deepened. It wasn't a frown, not quite, but he knew there was something I wasn't saying. He was worried about me and trying to hide it, just like I was hiding my fears from him.

So this is the price, I thought, a hard knot forming in my throat. This was the cost to the pain I had caused. Oliver and I would probably never find our way back to the friends we had been. Back to the easy, uncomplicated companionship that I had treasured so much. Now every moment had meaning, and every word exchanged had the potential to hurt or destroy us.

When I didn't say anything else, Oliver turned away and kept going. I scanned the mountain range one more time, then followed.

More hills loomed ahead. I kept my focus fixed downward, though, worried that I'd trip over something in the dark. The ground itself had started to change, becoming less golden grass, and more patches of bare dirt. It wasn't nearly as beautiful as the place we'd left behind. I kept expecting Oliver's voice to float back to me, asking about the Seelie Court and what was happening there. He remained silent.

Hours crawled by. Our silent march was disrupted only when Oliver's footsteps faltered. He recovered quickly—his pause was two seconds, if that—but his posture was too casual. I'd been timing his footsteps with my heartbeat, too, and I knew the misstep hadn't been my imagination. My instincts perked. Heeding their little voices, I looked to the right.

A werewolf hurtled out of the darkness.

It was Astrid. I gasped, recoiling. Oliver caught me, and just as I opened my mouth to scream, the dead alpha vanished into thin air. I stared into the darkness, still breathing raggedly. *What the hell?* Understanding struck a second later, and my expression cleared.

It was a nightmare. *My* nightmare. One of many, no doubt. I fought to breathe normally again.

"I'm sorry," Oliver muttered, his jaw tightening. He set me upright, and his fingers lingered on my waist. "I'm trying. I can't—"

"It isn't your fault, Ollie." I spoke without raising my gaze. I didn't want to see what else crouched in that deep darkness. "How much farther is this place?"

"It's just over the next hill," he said. His boots crunched in the dirt as he retreated. Worried Astrid would reappear, I adjusted my backpack and

hurried to catch up. Then, between one breath and the next, the world seemed to get darker. I lifted my head, realizing that we'd reached the end of another hill. A new, gigantic one loomed a few yards ahead, and it blocked out what little moonlight there had been.

The sight made me wilt. I'd discovered yet another change in the rules of this world—I got tired now. I got sore. Ten miles wasn't much, especially since I was a runner, but I'd been Belanor's captive for a few days. Some of those days I'd gone without food or water. I was weak, so weak that I'd carried it into my sleep. Scraping at the bottom of my soul for some resolution, I moved to catch up again.

Oliver must've heard signs of my struggle, because the pace he set was slower now. He tried to be subtle about it, and I just shot his back a halfhearted glare, knowing he'd feel it. We pushed on. Up and up, higher and higher. My breathing was shallow and I ached with every movement. At the halfway point, only stubbornness kept me going.

At long last, we reached the top. I'd just stopped to catch my breath when the clouds shifted again. Holding my heaving sides, I looked around with weary curiosity. At first, I didn't spot anything different—this view matched what we'd seen at all the other hilltops. The ocean was out of sight now, so there was only forest, more hills, and that mountain range Oliver had pointed out earlier. We were close enough now that I could see more details, and the slight glow of everything made me think there must've been snow somewhere ahead. There was a narrow gap between the rocks. A mountain pass.

Was that what Oliver had wanted me to see? I lowered my gaze, frowning, and that was when I spotted it.

The tree.

It looked like a sea monster. Like a wooden kraken. And the instant I made the comparison, I knew I'd seen this tree before. I started down the hill, moving so quickly that my heel slid on a patch of loose dirt, and I almost fell. Oliver caught hold of my arm, his grip fierce. Using more caution this time, I kept making my way down. We were in a sort of valley, a level stretch of ground at the base of several hills. They rose up on every side like canyon walls. I only had eyes for the tree.

I went right up to it, arching my head back to peer through its branches. This monstrosity was much bigger than the oak tree waiting for us ten miles away. I could hear Oliver's footsteps approaching from

behind. I glanced over my shoulder. “Is this what you wanted to show me?”

“The tree was part of it, yes.” He was frowning, probably because of the expression on my face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. It’s just…” I realized I was reaching out, about to touch the bark. I jerked away, unnerved that I’d been reenacting the image in my head. I cleared my throat and finished, “I had a dream about this exact tree.”

Oliver stopped just beyond the tree’s shadow, remaining in the moonlight. “What happened in the dream?”

I couldn’t tear my eyes away. I kept staring up at it as I said distractedly, “Nothing, really. I heard a—”

A shriek echoed through the air and cut me off. I spun around, my heart in my throat. Movement immediately drew my gaze. I shook my head, once, in a gesture of disbelief.

Seven-year-old Fortuna Sworn was running up the hill. She was followed closely by her brother, five-year-old Damon Sworn. “Run, Fortuna, run!” he shouted.

There was no time to wonder what was happening; I didn’t want to miss a second. The younger versions of me and my brother came right up to us, and their eyes slid past without faltering. They couldn’t see us, then. I backed away, unnerved that I was looking at my own face. It felt as if it belonged to someone else.

Why didn’t I remember this?

The children must’ve just come from church, because young Fortuna was wearing a checkered black and white dress. Tights covered her twiggy legs, and new shoes gleamed on her feet. There was also a black ribbon in her hair.

Oliver moved to stand beside me, and I knew this was what he must’ve stumbled upon after he left. I had so many questions, but those would have to wait. The children climbed the tree frantically, scrabbling at the bark like squirrels fleeing from a dog. My nostrils flared, responding to the fear on Damon’s face, but there was no trace of it beyond that. It was almost like he was just… pretending to be afraid. Why would he do that? I couldn’t detect Fortuna’s agitation, of course, but hers seemed more genuine. I could see it as she kept looking over her shoulder with wide, unblinking eyes.

High up in the tree, younger Fortuna's body gave a violent jerk. It was as if something I couldn't see had yanked her leg. She twisted around wildly, latching onto any branch she could even as her gaze shot downward. Whatever she saw made her mouth fall open in a horrified, mindless shriek. The sound of it sent a shiver down my spine.

That was the scream I'd heard in my dream.

Then she was hurtling to the ground.

I lurched into motion, reacting instinctively. Logic took hold at the same moment I reached the base of the tree again. Just as I suspected, there was no one to help. The screams had cut short. I looked up, confirming that the children were gone now. Faded from sight, just like Astrid had.

My mind burst into a dozen directions, thrumming with confusion. I backed away again, wanting to see the bigger picture, both figuratively and literally. There were so many pieces missing, though. One bothered me more than all the rest.

"Why were you running?" I whispered. I could feel Oliver looking at me, but he didn't respond—he knew I wasn't talking to him. I stared at the spot where the younger me had fallen, but in my mind's eye, I saw the beginning of the memory play out again. The two children, their shrieks piercing the air. They'd climbed the tree as if their lives depended on it. As if something was chasing them. Damon had treated it like a game, of sorts, but I hadn't been. I knew that much.

"There must be more," I said out loud. "More memories, I mean. That's what this is, right? A memory? And if I hid this inside my own head, there are probably others."

Oliver nodded, a chunk of golden hair falling into his eye. "I think so, too."

I finally tore myself away from the tree and faced him. My friend was still preoccupied, his brow furrowed. I studied his profile. In spite of everything that happened between us, he had turned around and come back, all because he thought I'd want to know about this place. He was still thinking of me, my needs, even when he was trying to move on.

A lump formed in my throat, and now I thought about how it had been his words, his voice that gave me the strength to beat Belanor. Not Laurie's, not Collith's. It was Oliver's.

I didn’t know how to express any of this to him, or whether I even should. Nothing had changed, not really. He was in here and I was out there. I’d fallen in love with someone else.

“I’m not going back,” I said at last, holding my backpack straps tight again. Oliver looked at me. “I want to keep looking. You don’t have to—”

“We should make camp tonight,” he interjected. Oliver rarely interrupted me, and I was so taken back that I didn’t glare as I should have. “You’re tired, and I have a theory that if you fall asleep here, you’ll slip into REM sleep. If I’m right, you might actually get some decent rest for once in your life. We have a lot of ground to cover, so you’ll need it in the days to come.”

We have a lot of ground to cover, he said. So Oliver was coming with me. I had hoped he would, but I still swallowed a sigh of relief. That was why he’d interrupted; I’d been about to tell him he shouldn’t feel obligated to come, and Oliver had probably found the suggestion so ridiculous he wouldn’t let me finish it.

“When did you come up with this theory?” I asked instead, raising my eyebrows. I swung my backpack to the ground.

Even in the dark, I could see Oliver’s cheeks redden. He shrugged and turned away to do the same with his backpack. “While I was gone, there wasn’t anything to do. I was just walking through wilderness. The mind wanders.”

As I unzipped the bag and pulled out several tent stakes, I glanced around again, daunted at the sheer size of this strange world I’d created. “Tomorrow, do we just… pick a direction and start walking?”

“Maybe we should aim for that mountain pass first,” Oliver said, glancing in that direction. It was out of sight, since we were at the bottom of the hill now, but I could still picture it, too. “I’m curious why your mind would create a separation from the land that’s on the other side of it.”

We refocused on setting up camp. I kept my head down and did everything mechanically, lost in thought. I remembered that view from the top of the hill.

My past could be out there, I thought. Memories, maybe dozens, lay tucked inside those pockets of wilderness and wild things. One of them might be the memory of that night. The night they died. What if these hills and mountains held the secret to what really happened? I’d seen something else in the house, I was sure of it. But the details had always been so hazy.

Murky. Like everything had taken place at the bottom of a swamp. This might be a chance to learn more about my parents' murders. If I could learn who'd taken them from me and Damon, I could make them pay.

My grip tightened on the tent stakes I held, and I peered toward that black mountain pass as if there weren't miles between us.

I couldn't wait to get started.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Somewhere between the dreamscape and coming awake, I lost a handful of memories. Which meant that, when I opened my eyes to a strange, darkened bedroom and felt a bare chest against my shoulder, panic screamed through me. I tensed as I prepared to shoot upright.

"It's just me," a familiar voice said, his tone low and soothing.

The tightness eased from my body. I remembered now—in the real world, I was at the Seelie Court. I'd fallen asleep in Laurelis Dondarte's bed. Gil was transitioning to a full vampire in the next room.

Letting out a breath, I rolled over and found my face so close to Laurie's that I could feel his breath. Somehow, though we'd probably been sleeping for hours, it still smelled fresh and pleasant. Not like toothpaste, but like the forest after an intense rainstorm. How did he always manage to smell so good?

It wasn't until Laurie gave me a sleepy smile that I realized I'd voiced the question out loud. Strangely, he didn't answer with one of his clever quips or innuendos. Instead, the faerie searched my expression with an inscrutable one of his own. I'd been about to comment that he hadn't stuck to his side of the bed, but the words died on my lips.

It was strange, falling asleep in a tent with Oliver and waking up in a bed with Laurie. I couldn't seem to move away, though. The fire was almost gone, and dying embers cast the faintest glow over the floor, flickering every few seconds. The weak light made it possible to see more details of Laurie's face.

The last time I'd been able to study him at this proximity, he'd been about to kiss me outside Creiddylad's tomb. Laurie's eyes were half-

lidded, the irises almost black in the dimness. His eyebrows were dark and straight. Dramatic, just like him. The planes of his cheeks were smooth and pale, but a hint of stubble had appeared along his defined bone structure and strong jawline.

Something about the sight of that stubble affected me. Heat spread through my lower stomach, followed immediately by the flutters of panic. Oh, God, what if Laurie could sense even this small burst of arousal?

"Why did you do it?" he murmured, his voice still thick with drowsiness.

I frowned, silently ordering my heart to slow down. "Do what?"

"Try to destroy yourself with dragonfire."

As quickly as it had come, the rush of desire retreated. Laurie's words replaced the feeling with a memory. I saw that flash of scales on Cyrus's throat and the devastated look on his face as fire hurtled toward me. Shame filled my throat. I lowered my gaze and stared down at our arms. Laurie and I each had one resting on the bed between us, not quite touching.

"Trust me, I won't be making that mistake again," I muttered, "Being human was more terrible than I'd anticipated."

I saw the edge of Laurie's face move as he frowned; the firelight was almost completely gone now. His voice was sharper as he said, "Usually I find self-destructive behavior entertaining, but what you did was worryingly stupid. Hopelessly moronic. Shockingly idiotic—"

"I get it, Laurie."

"From the moment you stepped foot in the Unseelie Court, you began making enemies. It was almost impressive. Truly, I've never seen someone cause so much uproar within so short a timeframe. With every admirer drooling at your feet, there was an assassin at your back, holding up a knife. You had one advantage over them, one thing that kept most of those killers at bay, and you threw it away because of a lover's quarrel. I knew you were impulsive but I never thought you were a fool."

I bristled. "Excuse me? You call total betrayal a *lover's quarrel*?"

"No, I call total betrayal just another Tuesday. And you didn't answer my question."

"Annoying, isn't it?" I countered. I glared at Laurie for a moment, but even that took too much effort. I was still so tired. What time was it? Why was Gil's side of the bond so quiet?

I was trying to ignore Laurie, but it wasn't working. He just laid there, looking at me, waiting for an answer. It was hypocritical, really. Any time *I* asked *him* a question, he danced around it as though life were a strange waltz and he was the only one who knew the steps.

Sighing, I relented and gave Laurie what he wanted, because one way or the other, he'd get it anyway. "Learning the truth about Collith felt like a breaking point. I didn't go on a murderous rampage because of a lover's quarrel, it was because of *everything*. Every shitty, horrible thing that's happened to me or my family since Jassin took Damon from his garden. I'm not saying it's rational, but I started thinking of it as the solution to all my problems—getting rid of the Nightmare part, the Fallen part. Separating myself from that world entirely. I was convinced being free of it would ease the pain. That constant, eternal, fucking relentless *pain*. So I went to a friend and asked him to help me. It was the most selfish, most reckless thing I've ever done, and I think I regretted it from the second I saw the look in Cyrus's eyes."

There was a pause. Nervousness twisted in my gut; I didn't know how Laurie would react to the unexpected vulnerability I'd handed him. He wouldn't mock me, of that I was sure, but what if he tried to make my pain seem small? What I considered trauma, Laurie probably considered inevitable. He was a faerie, and for them, violence was just foreplay.

After another moment he said, the bed shifting beneath us, "And I bet you regretted it a moment later, too, when the flames got to you."

I waited, but Laurie didn't lecture me again, or ask me anything else. He got out of the bed, and then there was a *click*. Lamplight flowed over the room.

"In my defense, I didn't think it would literally *burn* me," I said, blinking to help my eyes adjust. "I figured it was just—"

I caught a glimpse of Laurie's firm backside before I hastily averted my gaze. My cheeks burned. How had I missed the fact that he'd been *naked* the entire night?

Acting as if I hadn't stopped mid-sentence, Laurie reached for a silk robe and casually draped it around his flawless body. "Contrary to popular belief, I think the Fallen feel things more powerfully than humans," he said abruptly. "Think about it—if a human gets angry, there might be an argument or a fistfight. But when one of us loses our temper, there are wars or piles of dead bodies. If a human is grieving, there are funerals and

months of quiet pain. When a Fallen creature grieves, there is retribution and years of despair. It stands to reason that, if you keep yourself on such a tight leash, you're eventually going to rip free and do something you regret."

He strode into the bathroom, using the adjoining door. I sat up, holding my knees. I knew I should go check on Gil, but I was reluctant. It felt like once I left this bed, the chaos would begin again, another cycle of terror that would add a new nightmare to the ones already wandering the wilderness inside my head. A light turned on and spilled through the open doorway.

"Spoken like someone who has a regret or two of his own," I ventured.

Laurie reappeared and leaned his hip against the doorjamb, crossing his arms. He was still only wearing only his robe, and he didn't seem to care that the flaps fluttered at his sides, leaving everything underneath… exposed.

Before I fixed my attention firmly elsewhere again, I confirmed that Laurelis Dondarte's cock was just as big as his mouth.

I knew I wasn't imagining his faint smirk as he said, "The past is the past, Fortuna. I'm only interested in the here and now."

I snorted softly. "You're either lying to me or yourself, because part of you does live in the past. Quite frequently."

I didn't need to say Collith's name—I could tell from how his eyes narrowed that Laurie heard it anyway. He pushed off the doorframe and went back into the bathroom, moving out of my sight. I stayed where I was, and in the quiet, I finally noticed the slow pressure of anxiety rising inside me. We were wasting time talking about Collith, and the dragonfire, and whatever else we'd been whispering in this darkened bedroom. We had to steal Finn back and get all of us out of this palace.

"Are you ever going to reveal the plan for our grand escape?" I called, the irritation I felt seeping into my tone.

Laurie's voice floated through the stillness, echoing off marble. It was accompanied by the sound of running water. "I already told you, weren't you listening? Tonight, Mother dearest is throwing a party on palace grounds. We will take the opportunity to present you to the Court. When they see me at your side, it will lend you some protection, flimsy though it may be. Belanor will not be able to seize you in public, at least. It would be considered rude to claim another faerie's guest."

“Rude?” I echoed, disbelieving.

“Indeed.” More splashing. “However, if we attempt to leave in the same manner we arrived, I’m sure Belanor will invent some excuse or other to arrest you. Probably treason, if I were to guess.”

“Treason?”

Laurie came into the room again, rubbing lotion into his hands. “Yes, now hush. I’ve given this some thought, and what a puzzle it’s been. Using my abilities is out of the question, because if I were tied to any rumors of treason, it could be exactly what Belanor needs to have me executed. He’s been trying to do it for years, and I quite like my head where it is, thank you very much. I considered another obvious angle, which would be creating a diversion. Then I asked myself, what is the opposite of what my lovely brother would expect of me?”

“Why do you sound like you’re enjoying this?” I demanded.

“Because it’s Belanor,” Laurie said, as if this was answer enough. He crossed the space and opened a wardrobe. I blinked when he pulled some clothes out; I’d expected King Laurelis Dondarte to have the world’s biggest, most ridiculous closet.

“He may be a twat,” Laurie continued, pulling on a pair of crisp slacks. “but he’s not a complete idiot. He’ll be prepared for conventional tactics. Fortunately, I am anything but conventional.”

I wanted to get out of the bed now, but I had no other clothes besides the borrowed nightie. “Get to the point, please,” I sighed, making an impatient gesture.

His fingers lingered on the buttons of a white, long-sleeved shirt. *Stalling*, I thought. Laurie raked his hair back and adjusted the buckle of his slim, leather belt. I could tell, before he even turned to me, that I wasn’t going to like what was about to come out of his mouth. Then the faerie’s gaze met mine, and it was steely as he said, “Sorcha Cralynn.”

I was rigid, holding my legs so tight that I knew, without looking, that my knuckles would be white. “No. No fucking way.”

“She’s the answer to everything, Fortuna. She can wear your face and keep Belanor diverted while we—”

“Think of a new plan, Laurie, because there’s no way in hell I’m trusting her.”

The prince’s expression was pitiless, and I wondered how much he knew about my history with Sorcha. Whatever twisted version of the

events she'd given him, no doubt. "You don't have a choice. Well, no, that's not entirely true," Laurie amended. "Your choice is to trust Sorcha, and me, or stay here and become Belanor's plaything again. Even if I keep outsmarting him, there will be nothing I can do once he's king."

I was already shaking my head. "You're forgetting something. I'm a *Nightmare*, Laurie. You may see my real face, but every person in that room will look at me and see something different. The magic makes it so that even my body shape and hair color can change to match their ideals of perfection. If Sorcha takes my place, she'll only be wearing one face, one body—mine."

"And that's the only reason you're coming to the party. Why I'd ever deign to risk putting you in the same room as my brother again." Laurie turned to close the wardrobe doors and drawers. He spoke as he moved. "For the majority of the time we're there, it'll be you on my arm, confirming your identity and receiving whatever benefits there are to being associated with me. When the fae throw a party involving masks or costumes, we usually hold the masks down while we're making introductions or dancing. Once the switch has been done, Sorcha will just wear the mask continuously and make efforts to only draw the notice of the Guardians, so they can make their reports to the others, of course. She'll be wearing your gown, and even if her build or hair is different than whatever they just saw, I imagine many will dismiss it as the magic of a Nightmare. Most of us have never had the pleasure of meeting one of your kind, although we do love to lie and say otherwise. She's in the ballroom, the guards will mutter in those strange little microphones. Gracious, I do miss the days when the only form of communication was a landline—it made sabotage so much easier."

With a mournful sigh, Laurie finally fell silent. He waited for my answer, the lines of his body relaxed. I knew that was an act, though. Laurie never relaxed; he was always ready for the next scheme or the next argument. All at once, I understood why this faerie prince got his way so much of the time.

He just wore his opponents down until they were too tired to fight him anymore.

"She'll betray us the moment she gets a better offer," I said finally. My voice was as tight as my insides felt.

Laurie circled the bed. Without offering an explanation, he reached between the sheets and wrapped his fingers around my waist. He dragged me to the edge of the mattress, then planted his hands on either side of me. He'd brushed his teeth while he was in the bathroom, and I had the sudden, inexplicable urge to lean forward and taste that minty scent for myself. My sex clenched.

"Then we'll just need to make sure ours is the best offer," Laurie countered, his voice soft and persuasive. As if I'd fall for *that*.

"Fine. I'll go along with your horrible plan on one condition," I snapped, relieved that I sounded normal, at least. Laurie waited, keeping his face inches from mine. "We need to save Finn, too."

He'd been expecting that; I saw resignation in the shadows of his eyes. "The risk of failure is exponentially higher if we factor in the werewolf, Fortuna."

I lifted one shoulder in a shrug, still pretending to be unaffected by how we were sitting, with my knees pressing against both sides of his waist, his long-fingered hands on my hips. "Then we fail," I said simply, imitating the light tone he'd used seconds ago. "I'm not leaving without him."

"Belanor will set a trap," Laurie warned.

"Then we'll just have to be smarter than him."

I was the one ready for the next argument now, but it never came. For the second time in the space of an hour, we just looked at each other, the air thickening. I felt it again—that nearly overwhelming combination of power and possibilities.

The tension eased when Laurie gave me a wry smile. "You're right. It *is* annoying when you use my own tactics against me."

Before I could respond, knocking disturbed the stillness. It didn't come from the bedroom doors, but rather the outer doors that led to the hallway. Laurie's expression smoothed into a pleasant mask and he straightened, taking his warmth and his scent with him.

As Laurie's voice floated through the air, I left the warm covers and decided to focus on one thing at a time. First, bathroom. Second, check on Gil. Third, food. Fourth, escape from the Seelie Court. Simple. Easy.

A few minutes later, I left the bathroom feeling more ready to face the day.

Laurie was still in the foyer, deep in conversation with a dark-haired beauty. In one manicured hand, she held a gown wrapped in protective plastic, and in the other, there was a leather tote bag. She looked like a page ripped out of a fashion magazine, her slim figure encased in a tailored jacket, a pencil skirt, and high heels. Her thick hair was secured in an elegant knot at the back of her neck, and she wore a layer of red lipstick, perfectly applied.

I drew closer, painfully aware that I was still wearing the borrowed negligee. My hair hung free and wild over my shoulders and down my back.

"Well met, Lady Sworn," the female said, turning away from Laurie. She held a white paper bag out to me. "Organic, vegan, and gluten free, since King Laurelis couldn't say whether you had any restrictions."

"I told you that she'd eat anything you put in front of her," Laurie protested. "She's hardly picky. I've seen Fortuna eat a bowl of cardboard before."

"Are you talking about Cheerios?" I took the bag automatically. "It's *cereal*, Laurie."

He shuddered. "Same difference."

I couldn't resist unfolding the bag to peek inside. My mouth watered at the sight of a breakfast sandwich, and all I wanted to do was reach down and taste that food. Instead, I quickly refocused on the newcomer. She wasn't a faerie, but she moved like something that wasn't human. Her eyes were already assessing my figure, and if she was affected at all by the false beauty of a Nightmare, her expression gave nothing away. "Shall we get started?" she asked when our eyes met.

"Started?" I echoed.

Laurie gestured between us, holding a travel mug in the hand he used. Steam rose through the hole in the lid. "Fortuna, this is my assistant, Tabitha. She's brought your gown for this evening, and she'll be doing your hair, as well. Please don't give her any trouble—I already pay her an exorbitant salary, but she's not afraid to demand raises. Petty thing."

He pouted at her, but Tabitha just looked back at him with no hint of remorse in her face. She'd be an excellent poker player, if she wasn't already.

"Nice to meet you," I said with a courteous nod, ignoring the flicker of heat in my heart. Maria. Tabitha. Fortuna. Laurie wasn't certainly short on

the company of beautiful people.

The same could be said for you, I reminded myself. I really *was* jealous. There was no point in pretending otherwise. But what was I supposed to do with this feeling?

When Tabitha moved toward the bedroom, I shot a confused frown toward Laurie. *I thought we didn't want anyone to know I was here?* I hoped it said.

He interpreted my look correctly. "Tabby has been in my employ for fourteen years, give or take. She knows she'll always benefit more from loyalty to me than offers from anyone else. Isn't that right, Tabby?"

"Sixteen years. And speaking of offers, I just got another one from Lord Arthion."

Laurie smiled again, his gaze flicking to the doorway where Tabitha now stood. The dress and the bag were no longer in her hands. "Just wire the money into your account, little thief," he said.

"Already done," she returned.

Seeing the familiarity between them, I realized that Laurie had an entire life I knew nothing about. I'd always been aware, of course. With all his comings and goings, his occupation, and the history with Collith, it was obvious there were parts of this faerie prince I wasn't privy to. Catching glimpses of it now was startling, unsettling, and riveting.

I cleared my throat and asked, "Do you have a suit for Gil to borrow?"

The question was meant for either of them. As Laurie answered, he followed his assistant into the bedroom. "Tabby has already given the vampire some clothing. It's not a suit, though—it's a uniform. There's no way to explain his presence to the Court, not to mention that his kind wouldn't be invited to the palace as a guest."

"His *kind*?" I echoed hotly, going after him. Tabitha had seen Gil? I wanted to ask how he was, but I couldn't let this comment pass by unacknowledged.

At the threshold, I slowed and held my hand up, protecting my eyes. Tabitha had opened the curtains. Sunlight streamed over the wooden floorboards and thick rugs. How long had we been asleep? Had it been an entire day? No wonder my stomach was growling. Still holding the paper bag Tabitha had given me, I moved deeper into the room, waiting for my eyes to adjust.

The dress now hung on the wardrobe door. Tabitha sat on the bed, lining makeup and hair tools across the bedspread. I stopped near the bathroom door and watched Laurie pick up an armchair from the corner. Making it look light as the kitten he'd given me, he carried it over to the mirror. Then he perched his elbow on the back of the chair and turned as he said, "My dear, there's no time to delve into the discrimination, corruption, and politics of a worldwide organization such as this one. What matters is this vampire you seem to care so much about will be at the party, and he will be at our side when we're making our anticlimactic escape. Isn't that enough?"

I glared at Laurie for a long moment, thinking of everything he'd done for me. "Fine," I said.

It was as close to agreeing that I would get, and Laurie probably knew it. He straightened. "Well, then. Now that you two have sworn to be on your best behavior, I'm going to make some calls. Tabby, which room did you say my suit was in?"

"The study."

"Excellent. Oh, and you really should eat that, Lady Sworn. It's from my favorite café, an adorable place owned by the wrinkliest pair of humans I've ever seen." Laurie retreated to the doorway, rapped on the wooden frame with his knuckles, and moved out of sight.

The fact that he was leaving me alone with Tabitha meant he trusted her. However complicated he may be, Laurie cared about whether I lived or died.

"Take a seat," Tabitha said the moment he was gone. "You can eat while I'm working on you."

She didn't waste time or mince words, and something about the way she spoke reminded me of Adam. Maybe that was why I kept finding myself inclined to like her.

I settled into the armchair Laurie had moved, and Tabitha's fingers immediately began rearranging my hair. I noted how careful she was to avoid skin-to-skin contact. As I finally began eating the sandwich she'd brought, I looked at Tabitha in the mirror, studying that beautiful, impassive face behind me, and I couldn't contain my curiosity.

"So how did you and Laurie meet?" I asked impulsively, swallowing.

Tabitha didn't hesitate, and her response was matter-of-fact as she gathered my thick hair and secured it into a high ponytail. "Sixteen years

ago, His Majesty purchased me at a black market in Cairo. After the auction, he brought me to an apartment that was furnished and paid for. The deed was in my name, he said. Those were the first words I ever heard him say. There was also a bank account that would help me survive for several months. And then he offered a job, a position in his inner circle. If I turned him down, he would leave and never return. The apartment and the account were mine, no strings attached."

"There are always strings," I retorted, eating the last bite of the sandwich. Why was she telling me this so freely?

Tabitha's rosebud lips curled into a wry smile. She plucked the crumpled paper bag out of my hands and stepped away. She put the bag in a small trash bin, then went to the bed to retrieve some of her makeup supplies. She came back to the chair and said, "Of course. King Laurelis had been watching me at the market, you see. He saw the vengeance burning in my eyes. He knew I would not be able to resist a chance to undermine the creatures who had raped me and killed my family."

"Faeries," I said. It wasn't a question; my voice was flat.

"Faeries." Tabitha's dark eyes met mine in the mirror. Her smile became bitter, her eyes two hollows. "They wore masks, but I could see their ears. They moved like only faeries could, as well. I still don't know which ones broke into our home that night, though it doesn't really matter anymore. I live here, ruining them one by one. Learning their secrets. Making them dance like puppets. They look at me and see a slave, and I allow it because it suits my needs right now."

"Not to mention, it pads that bank account," I remarked. Tabitha made a sound of acknowledgement. I absorbed her story while she circled the chair. It was a mutually beneficial partnership—Laurie got a loyal spy, and she got her revenge. She was the king's secret weapon; all he had to do was point her in a certain direction. But somewhere along the way, as things usually did, it had gotten more complicated than that. Real warmth had formed between them.

Unaware of my thoughts, Tabitha bent and touched my face with a makeup brush. Every few seconds, she dipped it on a pallet of powders. Once she was finished with a layer of foundation, the female picked up a tube of eyeliner. "Don't move," she instructed.

I nodded and closed my eyes, inwardly struggling. I wanted to ask Tabitha what she was, but amongst Fallenkind, it was generally considered

rude. I'd also been meaning to ask her about Gil. The eye makeup took longer, though, and I got distracted by more thoughts, other worries.

When Tabitha leaned away, my eyes went to the mirror again. I didn't care about how I looked; I focused on the wardrobe, where the dress still hung in its protective sheath. My forehead wrinkled with lines of apprehension. "Do I want to know what he picked out for tonight?"

"As annoying as he is, King Laurelis does have excellent taste," Tabitha said in her monotone way. She walked briskly over to the dress and pulled down the zipper. Her white-tipped nails gleamed as she pulled the flaps apart, revealing the gown tucked inside to give me a good look.

"*Fuck*," I said on an exhale, staring. "He really does have good taste. If I told him that, though, I'd never win another argument."

"To be fair, have you really won any so far?" Tabitha asked, cocking her head.

I laughed, and a shock went through me at the sound. I was still smiling as I stood. "You have a point there. You'll have to let me in on your secret; you took him down without even trying."

Releasing the dress, the dark-haired female took several steps closer. Her expression had hardened. "Ah, but secrets are never free, Lady Sworn. Fortunately, the cost for mine is simple. A secret for a secret."

I wasn't smiling anymore. I reached for her mind with my own, readying to defend myself. Laurie was across the suite, and I didn't know how fast Tabitha could move—she might be capable of killing me before I could gather enough breath to scream.

"Ask me whatever you want to know. No need to play their games," I said, hoping to distract her. Sometimes, if my victims focused on something else, they weren't aware of my presence inside their head.

"What do you want from him?" Tabitha asked bluntly, her mental walls slamming down. I went tumbling backward, the connection completely severed. Tabitha quirked a brow and added, "No need to play their games."

My temples pulsed. I ignored it and considered the question she'd asked. For once, I didn't say the first words that came to mind, which would be nothing more than a naive denial. Everyone gained from a relationship, no matter what kind it was. True to her word, Tabitha had already told me her driving force, the purpose to her bond with Laurie—that was why she hadn't hesitated sharing something so personal.

Whatever she was, Tabitha was trying to protect Laurie. Because she cared about him.

I wasn't sure what I'd expected of the people in the Seelie King's life, but I definitely hadn't imagined these genuine connections I was encountering. There had even been something human and surprising in the moments I'd witnessed between Laurie and his mother.

"I don't know," I said truthfully, hoping Tabitha would hear it in my voice. "I don't know what I want from Laurie. He… *confuses* me. More than anyone I've ever known. But I do know I care about him, and I consider the Seelie Prince a friend. I'd fight anyone who tried to hurt him."

This seemed to be good enough for Laurie's assistant; she took the dress off the hook and closed the wardrobe door. I finally thought to ask about Gil just as she said, "You should put this on. The fundraiser has already begun, and it's not fashionable for the royal family to be late."

The royal family. Her words struck a chord inside me as I realized there was a possibility I'd be seeing Belanor in a few hours. If he was still alive when we left that blood-sprayed cell, it had been a night and a day since then—more than enough time to heal from the damage of that last encounter. I refocused on Tabitha, struggling to conceal the strangled feeling gripping my throat.

"Remember," she said, still devoid of all feeling. "Remember what he did to you. Feed your rage like a flame."

Though I got the feeling Tabitha was trying to encourage me, I couldn't help but feel a chill at the sight of her. She'd paused in the doorway, tall and silent, making me think of an assassin or an animal hidden in the shadows. Her beauty was the kind that felt dangerous, like thorns on a rose. She could have you bleeding in seconds.

Slowly I said, "I would never want you for an enemy."

Tabitha's eyes flickered, and I couldn't tell if that faint, fleeting light was agreement or amusement. "Good luck tonight, Lady Sworn," she replied.

Her heels clipped against the floor as Tabitha fetched the makeup bag. I stayed where I was, watching her with equal parts wariness and admiration. She left the room without a backward glance, and almost immediately, a tension I hadn't known I was holding in my shoulders

melted away. I was glad I hadn’t given in to the urge to ask Tabitha what she was.

Some mysteries, I’d learned, really were best left alone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The gown Laurie had chosen for tonight was… striking.

It was a combination of black lace and, beneath that, silk the color of bare skin. The skirt was long and flared behind me like a black river. I wouldn't be able to fight in it, but I was glad not to be wearing the nightgown anymore. I stood in front of the mirror, the chair returned to its place against the wall. Searching my body for any place that might conceal a weapon, I tilted my head and tugged at the ends of my tight sleeves. Too tight for a knife. "Damn it," I muttered.

A pale face appeared over my shoulder. Then, before I could release a startled breath, Laurie's silken voice said in my ear, "Tabby liked you."

I turned to face him, adjusting the heavy skirt. As I straightened, I scanned Laurie, starting at his feet and ending at his throat. The faerie prince was in a suit of blue satin, and over this he wore a frock coat with silver embroidery. The pattern was distinctly floral. There was a wide jewelry box in one of his hands, and when I saw what he held in the other, I pursed my lips to suppress a smile.

"Are you seriously holding a top hat?" was all I said.

Laurie's eyes narrowed. "Excuse you. You're just lashing out because you can't bring your knives or guns along. The Guardians would've taken them at the door, anyway. This tailcoat is from the Baroque Collection by Mario Moreno Moyano. How am I *not* going to wear a top hat with it?"

I wasn't sure how to argue with that. I eyed the silver embroidery and rhinestones on his suit. There was also a crystal brooch at the center of his chest. "I'm scared to see what you brought for me."

“Turn back around,” Laurie ordered. I gave him a look of warning—*don’t get used to thi*s, it said—and obeyed.

He tossed his hat onto the bed, needing both of his hands free to open the jewelry box. I heard the hinges give a faint creak. Laurie reached over my head a moment later, and something heavy settled on my chest an instant before there came the sound of a clasp clicking shut.

I lifted my head, looking into the mirror again. The necklace was made of golden, shining chains, so delicate and numerous that the dress beneath it was all but hidden. It wasn’t the first time Laurie had given me something like this, and I couldn’t bring myself to tell him I didn’t wear jewelry, as a general rule.

While I was still staring at it, Laurie placed a black rose behind my ear. He handled the delicate stem as though it were made of glass. I didn’t look at him, but I was sure he could hear my traitorous heart reacting to his closeness. Before I could make up a lie, Laurie stepped back and snapped his fingers. “Oh, I almost forgot.”

He fetched something from the bed. Two somethings, I saw as he returned to me. Laurie was holding masks, both of them mounted at the ends of satin-covered sticks. Until that moment, I had forgotten, as well.

The one he gave me was a confection of black lace and golden feathers. It matched my outfit perfectly, of course. I held it up and peered at the dimming room through two holes. I was still looking through them as I turned back to Laurie.

“‘We wear the mask that grins and lies, it hides our cheeks and shades our eyes. This debt we pay to human guile, with torn and bleeding hearts we smile,’” he murmured. His tone had the connotation of a sonnet or a poem.

I searched his eyes, though I wasn’t really sure what I was looking for, and my voice was low as I replied, “Except we are not humans.”

“That is very true, Fortuna Sworn. Shall we?” the faerie prince added, arching a brow behind the dramatic mask he’d held up, too. Something about the beaded whorls made me think of *The Starry Night* painting.

I didn’t answer Laurie’s question, because I knew he would hear the fear in my voice. Too much of his plan depended on other people, and all of them were strangers. I wanted Finn back, and I longed for our freedom, but the thought of leaving these rooms terrified me. Thankfully, Laurie’s

gaze went back to my hair and it instantly distracted him. His brows drew together. “One moment. Let me fix that first.”

He turned me back to the mirror, and I lowered my mask. Making a fierce effort to hide my reservations, I watched Laurie’s reflection, drawn to the graceful movements of his fingers as they fixed wayward strands of my hair. I noticed the rose again; I’d never seen a black one before. The petals looked like velvet. “Why did you choose that flower?” I asked.

Laurie was still preoccupied with my hair. His gaze met mine fleetingly as he said, “Isn’t it obvious? The bud represents death. Which is exactly what you are.”

His tone made it clear he meant this as a compliment, but I frowned. “I’d like to think there’s a little more to me than that.”

“Of course there is. But its darkness only makes the rose more beautiful, wouldn’t you agree?” With that, Laurie moved to my side and extended his arm.

I was anxious to see Gil, so I didn’t hesitate to take it. But as my hand settled on the crisp material of Laurie’s suit, my other one holding the mask, something inside me reacted to the contact. A sort of… shift. Why did it always startle me when I remembered he had muscles? Maybe because he kept them hidden, a mystery beneath all those pretty clothes. I tipped my head back to see Laurie’s face, like a flower to the sun. Drawn to the source of warmth and light, the attraction as inevitable as winter or daylight.

As if he knew exactly what I was thinking about, Laurie’s expression intensified.

Fear exhaled over my heart, its breath so cold that an icy layer formed. I forced myself to look away and turn my thoughts to the night ahead. We walked through the bedroom doors and into the foyer, the heels I wore making sounds that echoed off the high ceiling. They weren’t exactly practical, but there was a slit in the skirt that made it impossible to get away with boots or sneakers. If Laurie even owned a pair of either.

As I’d hoped, Gil stood near the outer doors. The vampire looked uncomfortable in black slacks and a white dress shirt, his posture making me think of a wet cat. A uniform, Laurie had called it. So Gil was going to be part of the wait staff tonight.

“Before you ask, no, I’m not all right,” he said the moment our eyes met. “I’ve been through a lot of fucking trauma in the past twenty-four

hours, and I plan to schedule many, many sessions with my therapist when this is all over."

I nodded. "Okay. Noted. We can talk later, if you want to. You know, if we survive this party."

Despite my nonchalant tone, I was trying not to stare. There wasn't much physically different about Gil, but something *had* changed. Unlike the creatures of urban legend, real vampires weren't always beautiful. There was always a sense of attraction toward them, though. It was an inexplicable allure that most people responded to, because most of us enjoyed a subtle, momentary sense of danger. And to look into a vampire's red-rimmed eyes was to know danger. Intimately. Like someone pressing a kiss against the hollow of your throat.

Then logic always found a way into your thoughts, dismissing the warning from your survival instincts. A human would probably shake their head and continue on.

But I wasn't afraid of Gil. I knew the shape of his soul, and however dark it had become, it wasn't evil. He was grieving… and probably *hungry*. Tonight would be a battle for him in more ways than one.

Directing my thoughts elsewhere, I discovered another problem while Laurie stepped forward and took hold of the long, curled doorknob. "What if a Guardian sees us on the way to the fundraiser?" I asked, squeezing my intricate skirt in my free fist. The other clenched around the mask. "Will they try to take me and Gil back to that cell?"

Laurie paused to answer. "At the Seelie Court, parties are the equivalent of a ceasefire. Not once the actual party starts, of course, but it's like the hours before a battle. Everyone is allowed to get ready and establish the appearance of civility."

"Just before you slaughter each other," I muttered.

"Precisely." He pulled the door open.

I rolled my eyes at Laurie's response and stepped forward, directly into a slant of pink dusk. I didn't hesitate—if there had been an ambush waiting, Gil or Laurie would've sensed the guards. Their heartbeats, the air going in and out of their lungs. As much as it was a pain in my ass, sometimes having Fallen creatures for friends was handy.

Laurie closed the door behind us and moved at a brisk pace. It felt strange to be walking the halls, unhurried and unafraid, when we'd been running through them only a day before. There were others leaving their

rooms, too, dressed as elaborately as we were. I saw a male in a tailcoat bow and extend his hand to a female in a pink gown, the sleeves puffed around her shoulders. Laughter tinkled in the air. Jewelry flashed in the dying sunlight. I observed everything in sight, constantly making comparisons between the two faerie Courts.

Then we rounded a corner, and I felt my lips part in awe. My thoughts evaporated like steam hitting open air.

"Welcome to Stone Hall," Laurie murmured. I couldn't look away long enough to acknowledge him.

It was the most beautiful room I'd ever seen.

Sunset poured through the lattice windows across from us. Dapples of light and dust motes moved in the shades of yellow and pink. The ceiling was three stories above our heads. Covering every inch of that arched surface was a painting of rainbows, flowers, trees, clouds, and elegantly-dressed figures. I stared at it as a voice rang through the air, announcing the arrival of a couple in front of us. I tore my eyes away from the vibrant images overhead and took in the rest of the space. Lustrous braziers attached to each of the travertine columns lit up most of the hall, filling it with dancing shadows and a warm radiance. The floor was made of red and white tiles.

"So what is—" I started, turning. That was when I realized Gil was gone.

"He's fine," Laurie said under his breath, flashing a brilliant smile at someone. He must've seen the panic on my face. His lips barely moved as he added, "The vampire knows his part for the night. Now it's time to play yours."

Finished with his latest announcement, the herald spun on his heel, facing us. I tried to hide my surprise at the sight of a tail coming out between the flaps of his long, brocade coat. The shapeshifter spotted me first, and I saw his gaze flare with immediate interest.

It had been days since anyone had reacted to me—to the Nightmare within, presenting the face they would think the most beautiful—and my first instinct was to reach for him. Touch his arm. Feast on the fears waiting beneath his skin. We drew up alongside him and I held the shapeshifter's gaze.

Laurie let out a delicate cough. My head swiveled toward him, and I was already scowling. Annoyed at the interruption, because he'd disrupted

the hunt.

Sharp words died in my throat when I saw the way he was looking at me. His eyes glittered, the corners of his full mouth tilted upward. Somehow, just as he had back in his rooms, the faerie prince had guessed at my thoughts. Slowly, Laurie turned away, but the connection between us didn't fade.

If it were Collith on my arm, he would have encouraged restraint and control. It felt good to be with someone who didn't judge or condemn that part of me—that had been admiration I'd seen in Laurie's face. Admiration and such wicked desire that it was difficult to breathe.

"Lady Fortuna Sworn and Prince Laurelis Dondarte," he told the herald now. I watched his face carefully for any reaction to his new title, searching for any sign of pain or resentment. Laurie just quirked a brow at me. He didn't raise his mask, so I didn't either.

The herald bowed before facing the room again, raising his chin to speak. I watched him gather air in his lungs, and when he let it out, the voice that came out of him seemed too big for his lean frame. "Lady Fortuna Sworn and Prince Laurelis Dondarte!" he boomed.

Faces swung in our direction.

It wasn't quite as dramatic as the Unseelie Court, where every conversation seemed to halt when I entered the room, but the music crescendoed at the same moment we moved into the crowd. Courtiers viewed me with the usual variety of reactions, albeit there was far more admiration here. Judging from our opulent surroundings, these faeries collected beauty like dragons hoarded gold. If I wasn't careful, Belanor might not be the only one in this Court who tried to claim me.

I gritted my teeth at the thought, silently daring any of them to try.

We were halfway through the room now, walking much slower than I would've liked. The reactions to Laurie made my eyebrows rise. Some openly stared, while others lowered their gazes and tried to glance at the prince subtly, discomfort shining in their eyes and twisting their mouths. I remembered the bitterness in Laurie's voice when I'd asked him about the sacrifice. *My dethroning was treated like an… embarrassment. Like I'd been fired from a job.*

"Don't let them get to you," I said quietly, squeezing his arm.

"Of course not," Laurie replied, waggling his fingers at the cluster of faeries standing near a pillar. They tittered. "I paid the musicians for some

extra enthusiasm upon our arrival."

I couldn't decide whether to roll my eyes or laugh, then I remembered that we had an audience. My smile died and I returned my attention to the predators surrounding me. The faeries of the Seelie Court were more… polished than the ones I'd ruled over. Wealth was evident everywhere I looked. Gleaming at every female's throat in the form of pearls and diamonds, hanging off male frames as flawlessly tailored suits, glittering above our heads as gold and crystal chandeliers. The Unseelie Court was a mishmash of fashions and status, but here such differences were carefully curated or completely hidden away.

At last, we reached the other end of the crowd and what I assumed to be Laurie's throne. Or Belanor's throne, if I hadn't managed to kill him yesterday. It seemed telling that we hadn't heard anything yet.

No one sat on it right now, not even Mab. The chair was, unsurprisingly, beautiful. It was high-backed and silver, with visages of a powerful horse forming each armrest. The cushions looked like supple white leather.

"Now what?" I asked under my breath, turning to face Laurie. Focus slid away from us as the next arrival was announced. The music became a light, playful melody again.

He bent his head and whispered in my ear, taking advantage of the murmuring crowd and nearby musicians. "Now we mingle for a bit. Make a point of being seen together before Belanor arrives and inevitably tries to entrap you. Sorcha is ready to make the switch, once we go through that doorway. Lensa will meet us at another rendezvous point with the vampire and the werewolf. That plan should already be in motion. The Royal Guard will be so focused on Sorcha in the ballroom they won't notice a group of rowdy guests leaving through the front."

I looked at the doorway Laurie's eyes had indicated, frowning in thought. "Wait, what happens to Sorcha if Belanor does entrap her, or the ceasefire ends and the Guardians just arrest her?"

"Do you care?" he asked, making no effort to hide his curiosity.

"Only in the sense that I don't want another life on my conscience. Beyond that? No. Not anymore." I met Laurie's gaze, holding it for a moment, steady in my certainty. Then I looked up again, unable to resist staring at those distant figures some more. Was that a unicorn? Were they real? Before I could ask Laurie, the herald began one more introduction.

I tore my gaze from the painted ceiling to see the newest arrival. I blinked when I realized I was looking at a human—her ears were rounded and there wasn't a trace of power about her. Not supernatural power, at least. She drew as many eyes as I had, but her beauty was no illusion. Her hips swung sensually as she walked and her bare skin gleamed beneath the chandeliers, the tulle dress she wore almost transparent.

"She is Simone, the most famous pet in all of the Seelie Court," Laurie whispered, noticing how I stared. "Had she stayed in the human world, there's no doubt she would've gone on to become the most famous ballerina alive. As such, she dances for us, and she is beloved for it."

Why didn't she stay in the human world? The question was on the tip of my tongue, but I suspected I already knew the answer. Amongst the fae, most of the human stories were tragic ones. "Did you just call her a pet?" I asked finally.

"We do not have slaves, of course. The Seelie Court likes pretty things. Slaves, the black market, these things are not pretty. Thus, they are called servants or pets. It's common knowledge that Simone belongs to Lord Arthion. He'd never actually marry her, of course, since most of our kind frown upon diluting the bloodlines."

"Of course," I echoed coolly. Lord Arthion was undoubtedly the male Simone had joined within the crowd. He looked like he was in his mid-forties, which meant he was an ancient fucker. Harder to kill. His blond hair was slicked back, and there were hints of gray at his temples. The rest of his broad frame was dressed in a suit much more subdued than Laurie's. He gripped Simone's waist possessively and pulled the human close, never once bothering to actually look at her or say a word.

"Pathetic," I said with quiet vehemence. Suddenly I remembered why I'd hated faeries before marrying Collith.

Another human walked past, this one carrying a tray laden with intricate glasses. Laurie claimed two of them with a single, thoughtless movement. His attention was fixed on the arriving courtiers as he presented a glass to me, already drinking from his own. I looked for Gil amongst the other black-and-white-clad individuals in the room, but I didn't spot that bleach blond hair anywhere. I held onto the stem of the glass as though I could be poisoned just by touching it. It took Laurie a few seconds to notice my hesitation.

“It’s safe enough,” he said with an elegant shrug. “Most of the drinks *are* bespelled, but this one merely shows you the face of the person you love most before your first sip.”

My eyebrows rose, and I fought the immediate instinct to look down. I didn’t have to be a Nightmare to know I was afraid of what would be looking back. “Whose face do you see?” I asked.

Laurie winked. “Why, my own, of course.”

I rolled my eyes, but something else caught Laurie’s notice. He turned before I could keep using conversation with him as a stall tactic. I stood there and tried not to fidget. I glanced around and caught at least four courtiers staring at me before they had a chance to avert their gazes. I barely noticed; most of my concentration was on the bespelled cocktail in my hand. After a few seconds, the curiosity became stronger than the dread. Steeling myself, I held my cup closer and looked down.

Damon’s face shimmered on the surface, and something in my chest loosened. Of course it would be him. My little brother. My oldest friend. He was the only one who understood the pain of what we’d lost and what we were. He’d given up everything to follow me when I went in search of happiness all those years ago. And despite the terrible things that had happened since then, I knew he would make the same choice if he were given a chance to redo it.

We made a promise, remember?

Letting out a breath, I lifted my head and refocused on the crowd. Queen Mab had arrived while I’d been distracted, and she was in the center of the room now, dancing with a male I didn’t recognize. Her appearance was more understated than I would’ve expected from such a fierce legend—she wore a dress with green embroidery, puff shoulders, and a stiff-looking overskirt. The string quartet played louder now, and the music was almost loud enough to drown out my thoughts. Almost. I felt Laurie’s eyes on me, but I didn’t look at him. I felt so raw, so homesick that it seemed like I would shatter if I acknowledged it.

He took my glass—now empty—and handed it to another server walking past, along with his own. I looked around, wondering what had happened to his mask. Then Laurie turned back to me, bent into a slight bow, and held out his hand. For a tilting, disorienting moment, I saw a different face peering down. One with hazel eyes, a jagged scar, and tousled brown hair. *Dance with me, Fortuna*.

I quickly put my hand in Laurie's, more in defiance than an actual desire to dance. A faint smile curved his lips, as if Laurie knew exactly what I was thinking. Like he always seemed to know, damn him.

Before I could say anything, Laurie led me onto the dance floor.

Queen Mab had retreated now, and she spoke with a courtier near the throne, her expression polite as she nodded. She was being very careful not to acknowledge me, I thought. Laurie's palm rested on the small of my back, bringing my attention back to him. I was still holding the stem of the mask in my other hand, but Laurie only wrapped our fingers around it. He stepped even closer and I felt his thighs graze against mine. Suddenly my mouth felt too dry, but I resisted the urge to swallow, knowing Laurie would be able to hear it. I also fought the instinct to watch my feet. I lifted my chin and met Laurie's eyes as if he'd challenged me. His smile only deepened as he pulled me into the steps.

It didn't surprise me that Laurelis Dondarte waltzed as well as he dressed. Though I wasn't nearly as skilled as any of the dancers around us, my partner was an excellent guide. In his arms, I didn't hesitate or stumble. I gazed up at him, unnerved that he wasn't making any remarks or jokes.

"I never thanked you," I said suddenly, stumbling. Laurie righted me without missing a beat. "Not… not just for helping me while we've been here. Thank you for what you did at Hallerbos."

For once, he didn't pretend or act coy. Laurie looked down at me and a lock of bright hair fell over one eye. "I never thanked you, either," he murmured.

I tilted my head. "Which part are you grateful for? How meeting me led to the loss of your throne?"

His hand tightened around mine. "How meeting you reminded me that there's more to live for than revenge or power."

Anxiety and confusion beat at my heart like the tips of flapping wings. There was so much I wanted to say, so much I longed to ask.

Instead, I leaned forward and rested my cheek on Laurie's chest.

If I'd startled him, he didn't show it. Laurie slowed our dance, and adjusted his hold on me so our arms weren't set at awkward angles. I could hear his heartbeat, strong and steady. One of the feathers on my mask tickled the bottom of my chin, but I ignored it. Somehow, in the midst of these lovely, vicious faeries and surrounded by glittering danger, my mind

went quiet. It felt like we were standing in the snow again. Just like that day, I could feel Laurie's warmth, even through layers of clothing. He smelled like spring breezes and crisp soap, a combination that shouldn't have worked, but it did.

The musicians hit the final note of the song, and it echoed through the room like a wistful chorus of sighs. Couples pulled away from each other, clapping politely. But I wasn't ready for this moment to end. I didn't think Laurie was, either—he held onto me a beat too long before he stepped away and faced the whispering crowd. I saw some gazes drop to our hands, which were still clasped tight.

I waited for Laurie to let me go. There was a gleam in his eyes as he bent and kissed the back of my hand. Despite the dozens of eyes on us, my body reacted to the sensual way he dragged his mouth across my skin. Then Laurie straightened, and we moved through the throng of courtiers again. We left the dance floor, going to the right this time, closer to the doorway where Sorcha hid. Once we were away from the audience, I saw his expression shift, losing the roguish look I'd become so familiar with. As if Laurie were an actor leaving the stage.

Because that's what it had been, I realized as I watched him. A performance. A statement.

A drop of doubt slid through my veins. A drop of poison. Was Laurie always putting on some kind of show? How much of what I'd seen—what I thought he'd allowed me to see—was real? Collith had shown me how skilled faeries were at the long con. Maybe Laurie just had a different endgame.

Stop it, Fortuna. He sacrificed his throne for you.

I banished every thought from my head and hurried after him, my heels making it impossible to be subtle. Most of the faeries in our path shifted politely, giving us room to pass. But one didn't; I wasn't surprised to see Lord Arthion step forward, forcing us to acknowledge him. He pulled Simone partly in front of his body like she was a trophy or an accessory.

"Lord Arthion," Laurie said as I drew up alongside him. Looking at his amiable expression, no one would ever know how he felt about the faerie male who had turned his attention to me. Sometimes I forgot how good Laurie was at pretending.

Another whisper of misgiving went through me at the thought.

“Curious choice of companion, my lady,” the courtier said to me, his eyes dropping to the hand I’d rested on Laurie’s arm. “One might think such a powerful figure would seek to align herself with more… advantageous connections at the Seelie Court.”

“One might think that,” I agreed. “One might also get stabbed in his sleep.”

The faerie’s head snapped back, as if I’d slapped him. His teeth bared in a faint, instinctive snarl. “I beg your pardon?” he said.

I pretended to consider this, but my opinion of him had been sealed the moment he insulted Laurie. “You can beg, but it won’t save you,” I decided.

“And that’s Lady Sworn,” Laurie interjected, winking at the faerie lord. “Isn’t she lovely? Well met, Lord Arthion. Please enjoy my mother’s party. Such a worthy cause, wouldn’t you agree?”

I allowed him to steer me away, and I could feel Lord Arthion glaring daggers at my back. That probably hadn’t been the smartest thing to do, but it had been almost an entire day since I’d insulted a faerie. A girl needed to let loose now and then.

“Who is he to you and why did I instantly hate him?” I asked once we were no longer within earshot.

“Lord Arthion is one of my brother’s most ardent supporters,” Laurie said lightly, nodding at a round-cheeked female with the ears of a deer. She blushed and curtsied. The feather sticking up from the back of her head bobbed. “He will be confirmed as the new Right Hand at Belanor’s coronation.”

My mind was still on the first piece of information he’d just given me. Suddenly I knew why I’d taken such an instant dislike to Lord Arthion, even before he opened his mouth—Belanor’s cologne. I’d smelled it. The courtier either wore it himself, or he’d spoken to Belanor recently enough that it still clung to him.

Any friend of Belanor’s was an enemy of mine.

Laurie stopped once we reached the side of the room, the shadow of a pillar casting half his face into darkness. He crossed his arms and propped his shoulder against the wall. He immediately began to watch the goings-on around us, seeing everything, memorizing small details, tucking them away for later assessment.

I knew I should look away, or hide my face behind the mask. Laurie would notice how hard I was staring at him, and then he'd be unbearable about it.

But I didn't.

Laurie's focus moved over me, then darted back, his eyes meeting mine. Caught. I felt my cheeks redden. Even now, I didn't stop staring. Laurie quirked a brow. I waited for him to make one of his ridiculous comments. But he pushed off the wall, searching my gaze with an expression I'd never seen him wear before. Cool marble greeted my fingertips, and I jumped, realizing that I'd backed up against the pillar. Laurie moved so close that his chest whispered against my nipples, the barest brush that had them standing on end. I looked up at him and swallowed, unnerved by his seriousness. By the need heating between us. What was happening right now? When had *Laurie* started making me feel like this?

Lensa's voice cut through us, her tone managing to be annoyed and bored at the same time. "Am I interrupting something?"

I blinked and moved away like I'd been shocked. Laurie didn't take his eyes off me as he said, "Yes. What's happening?"

I tried not to blush as I focused on his sister. Princess Lensa Dondarte looked much different than the last time I'd seen her—tonight, in place of the formidable armor, she wore a dress of black leather. Her heart-shaped face was accented by the loose, silver waves that hung over her shoulders and down to her waist. There was no jewelry at her ears or around her neck, but I'd bet all my money that she'd taken the time to hide weapons beneath that flaring skirt. Like me, Lensa wore dark heels where she probably would've preferred boots or some other thick-soled shoe that made kicking someone more effective.

Evidently the Seelie Court was strict about footwear.

"Nothing is happening," Lensa answered, drawing me out of my thoughts. "That's the problem. I haven't gotten the signal from Morelli. There's been no sign of Belanor, either, so I haven't been able to track his movements."

Laurie made a dismissive gesture, the silver rings on his fingers flashing. "He's not coming, but it doesn't matter. He was irrelevant to tonight's outcome."

“How do you know he isn’t coming?” his sister demanded, voicing the question I’d been thinking.

“He would’ve arrived by now. This is a good thing, Lensa. But the longer we stay, the more we risk being present when the ceasefire does end. I believe we’ve fulfilled our purpose in being here. Let’s make the switch and send you on your way, Queen Fortuna.”

“Prince Laurelis!”

“Oh, fuck. No, don’t turn around,” Laurie muttered out of the corner of his mouth. “That’s Lady Trellis. She’s married to the wealthiest selkie in the world, so no one dares to offend her. She wants one of her daughters to be the first selkie to marry into a royal family—say what you will about seals, but they’re relentlessly ambitious. Shit, she’s coming this way. *Help me*.”

“This is for not telling me about the cherubim,” I chirped back, patting him on the shoulder before I whirled away and pursued another person carrying a tray. This one had some kind of meaty appetizer on it. I could hear Laurie greeting Lady Trellis as I nodded my thanks at the human. The man gave me a dreamy smile in return.

“He acts like himself around you,” Lensa’s voice said from behind. She, too, had abandoned Laurie.

I moved to stand beside her, starting on another appetizer that I’d snatched. “Laurie doesn’t seem like the kind of person to hide who he is,” I remarked.

Lensa scanned the crowd, her eyes bright with the same intelligence and alertness I always saw in Laurie’s. I supposed growing up as the heir to a throne made it necessary, learning how to survive. To protect oneself. In a way, despite his childish tendencies, Laurie had never gotten to have a childhood. I felt a pang of pity for him. I felt another one when I looked over and saw that Lady Trellis had latched onto his arm, physically keeping Laurie from leaving.

“He has his weaknesses,” Lensa said finally, startling me. The pause had been so long that I’d assumed our conversation was over. I turned back to her, but Lensa kept her eyes on Laurie as she continued, “You may have noticed that he’s as vain as a peacock. Still, Laurie took his position seriously. He played the game with the courtiers because he had to.”

“And because he thrives on it,” I countered.

She acknowledged this with a tilt of her head. “True. He did thrive from being king… and now that’s been taken from him. Which is why I should mention that if you cost Laurelis anything else, I will find you and slit your throat.”

Laurie’s gaze met mine at the same moment his sister finished her threat. There must’ve been something in our faces that hinted at tension, because his brow lowered in a silent question. I gave him a reassuring smile, accompanying it with a jaunty wave. From the corner of my mouth I said, “Tabitha is scarier than you, and she already asked about my relationship with Laurie. I’ll tell you what I told her. I consider your brother a friend, and I’d fight anyone who tried to hurt him.”

The subject of our conversation finally succeeded in extracting himself from Lady Trellis. Laurie evaded her hand, his laugh tinkling through the air as if he found her charming. But he was scowling as he returned to us, his face like a stormy sky.

“Infernal creature. Barely escaped with my life,” he muttered. “Is she still watching me?”

I started to respond, but a commotion drew all of our attention to the edge of the dance floor. Lord Arthion was upset about something; he spoke to Simone in a furious whisper, the words so sharp that they sliced through the air. He patted his pockets and his eyes searched the floor. Simone pulled one of the servers aside, her demeanor calm and her movements unhurried.

A hand clamped around my arm and steered me deeper into the shadows. I’d known it was Laurie the moment I caught his scent, so I didn’t struggle. I quickly realized we were heading for the doorway that would lead us to Sorcha.

Smart, I thought. Laurie had seen an opportunity and seized it—everyone in the room was distracted by Lord Arthion. The attention was finally off us.

But it wouldn’t be for long.

“Lensa will worry about the other two,” Laurie said. “The rest of my circle are waiting near the front door. They’ll surround you and your… companions as you make your way down the steps.”

It was easy to imagine the scene Laurie was going for. Everyone would probably be wearing coats, and clustered in a group to ward off the cold. What kind of condition would Finn be in, though? What if he couldn’t

walk on his own? There were so many variables that Laurie didn't seem concerned about. I felt another burst of frustration toward him, and I smothered it like a small flame, reminding myself yet again of the sacrifice he'd made.

"Is there a Door nearby?" I asked. "I don't exactly have a passport on me."

Laurie guided us through the doorway and down a narrow hallway. The ceiling was much lower than the others I'd seen, and the lights on the walls were so weak that most of the way was shrouded in darkness. Laurie talked while we hurried through the quiet space, the noise of the ballroom already muffled and distant. "There should be a car waiting for you. The driver is named Riggs, and he'll help you get to safety."

Before I could ask him about Gil and Finn again, a voice drifted past. "I was starting to think you'd stood me up."

Hearing my own voice was eerie and unsettling. Turning, my body stiff as the ice sculpture I'd seen in Stone Hall, I watched myself step out of the shadows.

Sorcha had gotten every detail correct. Laurie must've made preparations while I'd been sleeping—before he'd even told me about Sorcha's part in tonight's plan—because she wore a gown identical to mine. Her makeup, her hair, the way she held herself. All of it was me. She was even arching her eyebrow like I did sometimes, her expression slightly haughty.

She'd achieved this from memory?

My mind flashed back to the last time Sorcha and I had seen each other. We'd been standing on an icy, night-covered street in Denver. Sorcha had just decided not to kill me, despite the money she'd been paid by yet another one of my enemies. *Our friendship didn't mean nothing, Your Majesty. Let tonight be the proof,* she said.

"It's good to see you again, Fortuna," she murmured now, her overly sweet voice triggering more of the past. I thought again of the summer Sorcha had seduced me. She'd known exactly what she was doing with every innocent kiss and moonlit conversation, drawing confessions and secrets from my heart with her cloying voice. That time, she hadn't done it for money—she'd done it for *fun*.

"Who left your cage open?" I asked flatly. It was the only greeting she would get from me.

Sorcha just smiled. She brought her hand into the open, revealing that she held something. With a single flick of her wrist, the material unfolded and fell to the ground. A cloak. Coming closer than necessary, Sorcha put it around me and secured the front clasp.

"Good luck," she said, drawing the hood up. Her breath touched my lips. "I genuinely hope you survive Belanor. I never imagined that a summer fling with a broody teenage Nightmare would end up being so enterprising."

My blood cooled. I caught myself wondering what the inside of her mind looked like. What her fear tasted like. Slowly, I removed the rose that was still tucked behind my ear. My fingernail brushed against the skin of Sorcha's temple as I put it around her ear instead, and I caught her eyes widen before she could hide it.

"You know," I said, "faeries like you are treasures, Sorcha… you just want to bury them."

"We may have a problem," Laurie said abruptly, appearing at my side. He probably just didn't want to deal with Sorcha's body after I killed her. He ignored my glare and continued, "Lensa hasn't heard from Morelli. But I have another idea for you, Lady Cralynn, should my brother cause trouble."

Sorcha's gaze shifted to him. Looking at my own face was still disconcerting, so I dropped the mask at her feet and left the two of them to their plotting. I picked up my skirt to walk toward the door at the other end of the hall. The cloak was heavier than I thought it would be, and the hood made the room feel even darker.

Maybe that was why I didn't notice the Guardian.

He'd opened another door soundlessly, and his body filled the entire frame, bulky with armor. By the time I noticed him, I almost collided with that round, plated chest. I watched the male's eyes go to Sorcha, then back to me. *Shit*. I was frozen in indecision. For an instant, everyone was utterly silent. It felt like even our hearts and lungs had stopped.

The faerie's throat split open. A spray of blood hit my face.

I jumped with slow shock, staring first at the gore-covered tip of a blade protruding from his neck, then up at the Guardian's startled expression. I knew I probably wore a similar one.

Eyes wide and unseeing, the male tipped forward and crashed face-first onto the unforgiving floor.

Gil and Laurie stood on the other side of him.

"What the *hell*, Laurie?" I snapped. He must've sifted the moment he heard the door open, I realized. Where had Gil come from? I turned to the vampire, but his eyes were fastened to the unconscious faerie at his feet. The smell of blood filled the corridor.

My insides were already getting shredded by guilt's relentless claws. I saw a flash of that tree-surrounded clearing again, bodies strewn everywhere, blood soaking into the dirt and grass. I saw myself throwing that Agatha Christie novel down onto a dead person's chest, their eyes as dull and vacant as the eyes of the Guardian at my feet now.

Laurie's arm moved, and I heard a clink against the tiles; he'd thrown a dagger next to the body. "Give a man a fish, and he'll eat for a day," he quipped, straightening his suit. "But give him a knife in the base of the skull, and he'll never be hungry again."

I sputtered. Blood flew off my lips with every exhale. "That doesn't even make *sense*, you fucking—"

"Well, I couldn't very well break his neck, now, could I?" Laurie's tone was exasperated. He gestured impatiently at the dead guard's pointed ears. "He would've just healed!"

"That's *not* the issue—"

"Wait, are you honestly endangering our escape for a *philosophy* debate?"

"Stop interrupting me, damn it!"

"Holy shit," someone said. Laurie and I turned at the same time. Lensa stood behind us, gripping her bright hair. Tufts of it stuck up between her fingers. "Please, don't ever get married. You two would be a *terrible* couple."

Gil moved past her and stopped when he reached my side. I was too furious to greet him. Laurie's eyes had narrowed at his sister. "I think I'm offended," he decided. "Fortuna, are you offended?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake." I stalked away from them both. I stormed back a moment later, realizing that Lensa hadn't brought anyone else with her. "Wait, where is Finn?"

"I went back to the rendezvous point, and he still wasn't there." She glanced at Laurie again, and her jaw tightened. "Something else was waiting for me. I'm sorry, Laurelis, but Morelli is dead. Belanor must've

found out where his true loyalties were. From the state of the body, I'd say he was tortured."

"Fuck." Laurie let out a breath. He spun away, putting one hand on his hip while the other rubbed his mouth. The line of his shoulders was taut, his movements thoughtless. He walked one way, stopped, then walked past us.

I was struggling, too. Morelli and I hadn't exchanged more than a few words, and he'd been generally unpleasant during those brief interactions, but someone else had died because of me. Someone else would be talking to a headstone instead of the person they loved. A person who had liked red cars and could make Laurie smile his real smile. I tried to blame Belanor again. This time, my conviction felt flimsy. False.

When Laurie finally turned back to Lensa, I saw real grief in his eyes, and I remembered that Lensa had called Morelli his Right Hand. The guilt ripped into me even deeper.

"*Fuck*," Laurie said again, his eyes too bright. "Has anyone told Anne yet?"

She shook her head, her lips a dark slash. "No. We thought it should come from you."

I felt like an intruder to their shared sorrow. Thinking to give the siblings a moment of privacy, I sidestepped the pool of blood on the floor and reached for Gil's arm without thinking. It was like I'd known him my entire life, and the gesture was as natural as it would've been if I had touched Damon or Matthew. I was about to let go, but then I noticed how the vampire's side of the bond had lit up. I barely had to wonder what he was thinking before I could hear them. His thoughts and feelings. The core of Gil, the warm and gently-lit soul within the shroud of death that now surrounded it.

Being near me made Gilbert Payne feel calmer. Stronger. He knew I was there, lingering in the light of him, a silent observer to every secret and impulse. He didn't care; he just knew it was easier for him to resist the blood when he could feel my cool presence, pressing against him like a cold compress against this fever dream he'd been in since those fuckers took him in London. The blood, the blood, the blood. God, he wanted the blood. He wanted to get down on his hands and knees and lap it off the tiles like a goddamn dog.

I blinked, pulling back from Gil's thoughts. He wasn't even looking at me; he stared down at the body again and I could sense his unraveling control. Laurie and Lensa were still speaking, their silver heads bent toward each other. I pulled Gil away. Away from the blood and the conversation I didn't want to hear. Thankfully, Gil didn't fight me.

I wasn't sure what made me slow down, then stop altogether. One moment I was drowning in guilt, and the next I heard a whisper at the edge of my senses. A sense that we were being watched.

Vulen's voice crept into my ear; he was standing right behind me. "Don't turn around. Lose the Dondarte siblings and meet His Majesty in the library. Or the werewolf dies. Come alone, or—"

"—the werewolf dies," I finished tersely. "Yeah, I think I got it."

Gil gave Vulen a hiss of warning, but I held out my hand. The vampire leaned back, his fangs extended over his lower lip. I longed to kill Vulen then and there. What would that cost Finn, though? Every decision had consequences. "Gil stays with me, though. If Belanor doesn't like that, you can tell him to go fuck himself."

Without giving the faerie a chance to respond, I turned and stalked back to Laurie. Lensa tensed, reaching for a sword that wasn't there. *You and me both*, I thought. I'd feel much better with a knife in my hand right now.

"Keep your mind empty for what I'm about to say, or better yet, hide your reaction with mundane thoughts," I instructed under my breath. Laurie's expression didn't change, but his eyes darted to the stretch of hallway where I'd been standing. I knew, without turning, that Vulen would be gone. "Belanor is alive and just sent Vulen to fetch me. He said to come to the library alone or they'd kill Finn."

I watched Laurie's mind work. I didn't need to be a telepath to know at least some of those thoughts. The allies he'd been counting on were missing. We'd already put the decoy Fortuna in place. There was no going back, and there was no going forward. Not without Finn, who Laurie knew I wouldn't leave behind.

"Do as Belanor says. Look for the red doors, and when you get there, stall for time," he said back, the words barely audible. Louder he added, "We'll have to split up. Lensa and I will deal with the wolf. Take the vampire and get off palace grounds. Wait for us at the next rendezvous point."

This was for Vulen’s benefit, I realized. Laurie knew he’d be listening to every word we exchanged, making sure I followed the parameters Belanor had set.

Tensing at the thought, I imagined my mind as the wall of a prison, thick and impenetrable with barbed wire along the top. What was Laurie’s new plan, then? He and Belanor kept dancing around each other, making every effort to avoid a physical or public confrontation. How could he help me save Finn without being seen or using his powers? Laurie may have vowed to kill Belanor, but when it came down to it, was that something he was truly capable of?

I wanted to argue, but anything I said would be overheard. There was no time, anyway. I nodded to Laurie, then at Lensa, hoping they would see the genuine gratitude in my eyes. They were risking everything to help me, and I wanted to acknowledge that before I went to face Belanor.

Sparing them the discomfort of responding, I picked up my heavy skirt and walked away. Gil kept up with me effortlessly, and I suspected he’d heard everything, because he didn’t ask any questions. I could feel Laurie’s eyes on my back for a moment, and then the sensation vanished. We hurried down the empty hallway, sounds from the party drifting past. Most of the lights were dimmed in this part of the palace, though, and soon it felt like we were completely alone. Just as Belanor wanted.

“This way,” Gil muttered. He could probably smell the books, or Finn, or both. It was a good thing I’d insisted on bringing him, I thought as I followed his lead. Neither Vulen or Laurie had bothered giving me directions. We snuck through the shadows, weaving behind pillars and plants. Then I turned my head and saw them.

The red doors, Laurie had said.

For once, he hadn’t been speaking in metaphor or riddles—two doors towered over us, painted the color of a tree at the peak of autumn. They stood wide open, allowing any passerby to see the shelves of books inside.

Gil held up two fingers. Two people were in there, the gesture meant. I nodded to indicate I’d understood. My heart was unsteady, but there was nothing hesitant about how I crossed the threshold. Gil moved in a blur and appeared at my side again.

Together, we walked into the library.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Like the rest of the palace, the high-ceilinged room was lit by wall sconces and lamps.

There was a chandelier overhead here, as well, but every bulb and dangling bit of glass was shrouded in darkness. I didn't need to ask any of the palace staff to know why—this was not a time for being seen. For Fallen, this was a time of slinking through the shadows and hunting our prey.

And hunting me was exactly what Belanor had been doing all night.

He stood in front of an enormous window, holding the edge of a dagger to Finn's throat. No doubt it had been soaked in holy water. The werewolf was in his human-shaped body, wearing identical scrubs to the ones I'd been put in. He knelt at Belanor's feet, hands bound in front of him.

The sight of Finn on his knees made my power surge forward, snapping like jaws at cage bars. At least his body looked whole and healed. Although, in my case, that usually meant I'd been tortured beforehand. What had Finn endured because of me?

Blinking rapidly, I forced myself to search the area around him and Belanor, searching for Guardians or any indication of the trap he'd inevitably laid. But there didn't seem to be anyone else in the library.

"Welcome, Miss Sworn. I'm so pleased you received my invitation," Belanor said, his voice pleasant and polished. "The vampire is welcome, of course. It saves me the trouble of finding him later."

At a glance, I could see the faerie prince was fully healed from our last encounter. Wearing a suit of pale blue and lacy sleeves, Belanor looked as collected as he had the day we'd met. His pale hair was gathered in a short,

neat ponytail that gleamed. The sight of him was a reminder, as if I needed one, of how formidable the fae could be. I'd smashed Belanor's skull into pieces—broken his elegant, burned face until it was unrecognizable, and there he stood as if nothing ever happened.

"Release my wolf. Right now. I won't ask twice," I said at last. The words were flat and brief.

I'd come here with the intention of stalling for time, as Laurie had instructed, but the sight of Belanor's hands on Finn was repugnant. Suddenly I didn't care about plans or strategies; I just wanted my friend's freedom.

The silence stretched. Gil shifted beside me, as if he were physically restraining himself from rushing forward. I remembered the tortures Belanor had put him through alongside me. I'd been so focused on my own list of grievances that, somehow, I had forgotten Gil's.

Seeing the black hatred in his eyes, it felt like Belanor's crimes against the vampire transcended what I'd endured. Unlike my circumstances, there would be no reversing what Gilbert Payne had become. A deep, vital part of himself was gone forever, and I'd want revenge on the person responsible for that, too.

Fuck, I thought. I shouldn't have insisted on taking him with me. Gil's bloodlust, focused solely on Belanor now, could put Finn at risk. There were some gambles even I wasn't willing to make. It was the only reason I hadn't used my powers yet—in the time it took to get through Belanor's mental defenses, he could drag that dagger across Finn's throat.

While I tried to think of a way to get Gil out of here, the object of our loathing pretended to consider my command. In a silent taunt, Belanor moved the dagger so the tip balanced on the surface of Finn's flesh. Then he tilted his head and asked, "Or what?"

Despite what I'd done to him, there was no trace of fear around the faerie prince. I studied his curious expression, and it hit me—Belanor wasn't afraid because he didn't view me as a threat. By some miracle, he truly thought I was still human. I'd been half-convinced he would guess the truth after I'd stomped on his head with a strength no true mortal would have.

If this fanatic knew I was fully healed, that my powers had been restored, he'd hunt me to the end of my days. Across every continent and through every crevice of the world. I would never be able to return to

Granby or lead a normal life. Not to mention the price my family could potentially pay, as well, if Belanor decided to go after them.

I had to keep my powers secret. But how could I get us out of this without magic?

Use his weaknesses, someone instructed from inside my head—I knew right away that it was Oliver. I also knew that he wasn't real, but hearing his voice steadied me, just as it always had. I released a brief, soundless breath and thought about what I'd learned in the weeks of being Belanor's prisoner. What could be used against him?

Me, I thought.

Right now, *I* was Belanor's biggest weakness. The realization triggered an image, and I recalled how the cherubim under the prince's command had reacted to my ultimatum the night they came to Bea's. I'd threatened to hurt myself, and like a spell, every one of them had followed my commands. We had stood in that ruined bar, facing each other across a battlefield of upturned chairs and blood.

Belanor was still waiting for a response.

Holding up one finger, I turned away from him and took stock of the rest of the room. As I hoped, there was a desk on the other side, bigger than a desk had any business being. I walked over to it, nudged the opulent chair aside, and opened the top drawer.

A letter opener rested in the center, atop a bed of green velvet. It looked like a miniature sword.

Keeping all expression from my face, I picked up the tiny weapon by its silver handle. I hid it in the folds of my skirt and crossed the room again. The clip of my heels against the floor sent echoes toward the vaulted ceiling, and the sound cut short every few yards when I walked on a rug.

I stopped at Gil's side, exactly where I'd been standing before, and placed the edge of the letter opener against my throat.

"Or I'll end this here and now," I said calmly.

Gil and Finn spoke at once, their voices overlapping. I kept my eyes on Belanor, too focused on him to really hear what they were saying.

"Silence, pup," he said, giving the werewolf a shake that made him flinch. My fingers tightened around the letter opener. Before I could threaten Belanor or demand Finn's release again, he flashed a sardonic

smile. “How delightfully dramatic. You really have been spending time in Laurelis’s company.”

I felt my lip curl. “How delightfully sexist. You really just assumed everything I do is because of a male. Now let Finn go, or you’ll have to remove me from this room in a body bag. If that happens, you’ll never know whether I was strong enough to survive your spell. Hey, you and Vulen never got to finish what you started—maybe forcing me to relive my worst memory was the torture that would’ve worked.”

My flippant tone belied my rolling stomach. To hide it further, I pressed the letter opener harder against my throat, drawing Belanor’s attention back to it. I was careful not to break skin, for Gil’s sake.

The Seelie Prince allowed another pause to hover between us, his expression caught halfway between disdain and admiration. “You claim to speak your own mind,” he said finally, “and yet it is my brother’s words that come out of your mouth. His cleverness. His arrogance.”

“No,” I said, my voice softer now. Not with rage or violence, but pain. I hoped Belanor misinterpreted it, because any glimpse of suffering would only bring him pleasure. I willed my heart to transform into concrete or metal. “They are *my* words. I am my own person, Belanor Dondarte. You tried to take that from me, and you failed.”

I could feel the intensity of Gil and Finn’s attention. I didn’t acknowledge either of them, legitimately worried that they’d take one look into my eyes and do something rash. The bond shimmered with everything Gil felt, and on the other side of it, darkness roiled.

“The night is not over yet,” Belanor reminded me. “Much can happen between now and the final bell toll.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. “Or it can all end right here.”

Belanor looked at me, and I looked at him. His face was disconcerting, but it wasn’t the puckered burn marks on the left side, or how it fit into the unburned side as if Belanor were two people fused into one. It was because of the resemblance to Laurie; I kept catching glimpses of it at certain moments and angles, and every time, it struck me all over again that he was Laurie’s twin. They’d shared a womb. Whatever time had done to their relationship, that bond couldn’t be completely gone.

What would severing it do to my own relationship with Laurie?

I swallowed and forced myself to add, “It *is* for Laurie’s sake, though, that I will let you live… as long as you let Finn go. What is it going to

be?”

There was one more frozen beat, one more breathless pause. Belanor lowered the dagger and stepped back, making a graceful gesture with his other hand that said, *Rise*.

Finn crossed the room, and it felt like all three of us stopped breathing. We were all tense, prepared for any abrupt movements. I kept the letter opener pressed firmly to the side of my throat and began moving toward the doors.

Belanor remained where he was, watching us with eyes that glittered. “I’m afraid I can’t let you leave,” he said.

Gil, Finn, and I simultaneously stiffened just as Laurie’s voice drawled, “Oh, I really think you can.”

He and Lensa came into the room, both of them carrying swords drenched in blue blood. *Belanor must’ve had Guardians posted in the hallway, waiting for his signal*, I thought.

The moment our eyes met, Laurie vanished and reappeared at my side. Shock had rendered me silent at first, but now I wanted to shout at him, to shake him as hard as Belanor had shaken Finn. All of Laurie’s efforts to avoid being directly involved in my escape, and here he was, throwing everything away to save me. Again.

I watched Belanor’s features smooth into a calm mask, but he couldn’t quite hide the gleam of calculation in his eyes. He hadn’t counted on losing Finn as leverage, and he’d misjudged the trust between me and Laurie—my tormentor had really thought I’d come alone. Underestimating me had always been the reason Belanor lost these skirmishes of ours.

I watched his eyes go to the letter opener, taking that into his considerations, as well. I hadn’t lowered it, despite Finn’s warmth at my back and Laurie’s arrival. As we waited for his reaction, Belanor’s stare became unfocused. There was a beat of silence, then two. At last he said, his voice like honey, “But of course, brother. This is all an unfortunate misunderstanding. I won’t detain our guests any longer.”

Laurie and Lensa didn’t move. They didn’t trust him, and neither did I. I couldn’t shake the sense that we were all missing something. An obvious, dangerous detail in the events unfolding tonight. Why hadn’t Belanor commanded his guards to take me once I got to the library? There were no witnesses, no risk to his reputation in taking me here.

I was the one to breach the silence. I raised my gaze to Belanor's and made my voice steel. "If you send the Royal Guard after us, I cut my throat. If you try to stop us from leaving the grounds, I cut my throat. If you hurt anyone else because of me… do I need to finish?"

"I think we understand each other perfectly, Miss Sworn. I hope you enjoyed the party. I've heard the chocolate fountain is to die for. Well, what are you just standing there for? Run along. Safe travels back to America!" Belanor made a shooing motion.

His tone grated on my already-frayed nerves. I looked at Laurie and jerked my head in the direction of the doors, saying curtly, "Come on. Let's go."

Our small, ragtag group left quickly after that. Gil didn't take his eyes off Belanor until we'd crossed the threshold and the faerie was no longer in sight. As I reentered the hallway, I expected a scene of carnage. But Laurie and Lensa must've hidden the bodies, or someone else had, because there were none in the hallway when we emerged.

I finally lowered the letter opener from my throat, sending a silent apology to my father, in case he could hear me through some lingering connection within the dreamscape. I'd promised him I would stop skirting the line between life and death.

Even after Laurie closed the set of doors, and we'd walked a few steps to put distance between us and the library, none of us spoke. A heaviness had settled upon the air, the knowledge that as long as Belanor was alive in that room behind us, we'd never escape. Laurie and Lensa included. *That* was why Belanor had confronted me, I realized in a burst. Why he'd allowed me to walk into the library and negotiate for Finn's life. It was a trap, just as Laurie had predicted. The only part he'd gotten wrong was that Belanor would set it to catch me.

The library had been a trap for him.

And Laurie had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. Because I was his weakness, too.

"I'll do it," Finn said suddenly.

He stood to my right, and though he'd spoken quietly, I jumped at the sound of his voice. I looked at him and realized what he was saying. He would murder Belanor, if any of us wanted him to. For the first time, I noticed that he was holding his wrist and that it hung too limply from his fingers. A broken bone was nothing to a werewolf's healing capabilities,

but the fae had probably pumped Finn full of holy water. My anxiety rose another notch.

Laurie and Lensa didn't respond to his offer, and I shook my head, giving Finn's other arm a gentle touch. "No. We can't."

As usual, the werewolf didn't ask any questions, though I knew he didn't fully understand what had happened in the library. He hadn't sensed Lensa and Laurie's fear when they were confronted with the reality of murdering their brother. The moment I felt that, I'd realized I couldn't be the reason Laurie killed his twin.

I was about to suggest we flee for our lives when Finn stiffened. Everyone's heads turned toward him.

"What do you hear?" Laurie's voice was uncharacteristically sharp.

"Footsteps," the werewolf said. His dark eyes stared at the wall and his entire body was still. "A lot of them. Heading in this direction from all sides."

Feeling Laurie's eyes on me, I looked at him and raised my eyebrows. "This is usually when you chime in with a dirty comment and then save our lives."

To my surprise, Laurie didn't smile. Instead, his full lips pressed together and his gaze shifted to the ever-darkening hallway I'd put my back to. "There are no passages on this side of the palace. That's probably why Belanor chose it," he mused, almost to himself. "We should still make for the front doors, but the odds of being intercepted are very, very high."

He moved his hand in my peripheral vision, and something glinted. I glanced down at the sword Laurie still held. He hadn't had a chance to clean it, so the silver edges were stained with blood.

My focus lingered on those blue smears, and I felt a heaviness settle in my chest as I accepted our fate. There was no other way out; we were heading into battle. A fight it was very possible none of us walked away from.

"We should even the odds, at least. The werewolf's scent is the strongest," Lensa muttered. She'd seen the writing on the wall, too. "Many of the guards will follow that, assuming Lady Sworn won't allow them to be separated."

"They would be right," I said flatly. With that, I moved to stand next to Finn again, using a language her and Laurie would understand. Regardless

of Laurie's speech about the value of hard proof, faeries were all about the unspoken statements. The insinuations. The power of suggestion.

In response, Lensa spun her own bloody sword, looking more like a twin to Laurie than Belanor ever could. "I have a few tricks up my sleeve, Lady Sworn," the leather-clad warrior informed me. "I can keep the wolf hidden until it's safe to find a Door. You'll have a better chance of fighting your way out if you're not taking on the entire Royal Guard at once. Do you want to escape, or not?"

I didn't answer, because I'd already given her one. Lensa saw this in my face and opened her mouth again, her eyes bright with impatience. Finn's voice floated through the tension between us. "I'll go with you."

I whirled on him. "Finn, that's not—"

"You freed me from the Unseelie Court so I could make my own choices again," he reminded me, his voice soft as ever. "This is what I choose. I'll meet you at home."

With that, my friend turned away. He nodded to Lensa, who nodded back, and the werewolf walked silently into the darkness. I watched him go, feeling the acrid rise of helplessness and guilt. Lensa murmured something to Laurie, and he said something back, equally hushed. Probably saying their goodbyes in the event something went terribly wrong.

My heart quickened as I wondered if we were making a fatal mistake. *Fuck this*, I thought. I took a single step forward and gathered breath to call after Finn.

"Oh no, you don't." Laurie caught hold of my arm and steered me in the opposite direction. "This way."

"Get your hand off her," I heard Gil snarl.

Consumed with worry for Finn, I couldn't bring myself to care about their dick measuring. I twisted my head around, hoping for a last glimpse of the werewolf. Both he and Lensa were gone, leaving me, Gil, and Laurie alone in the hallway. Finn was right, anyway—I couldn't force him to do what I wanted. I gritted my teeth and pulled out of Laurie's grip, but I knew we didn't have time for hysterics.

Laurie barely noticed. His attention was fully on the vampire on my other side.

"Calm yourself, newborn," he said in a voice that contained every year he'd been the calculating king from his story. He didn't bother speaking

lower as he continued, “You should know, if it becomes clear that you’re a danger to her, I’ll put you down. Pretty bond or no.”

When Laurie mentioned the bond, my eyes narrowed at him. He ignored me and started moving. Gil stared at Laurie’s back, the edges of his face overly sharp again. I waved my hand to get his attention. “Hey, Gil? I appreciate the concern, but I can take care of myself. Especially when it comes to Laurie. You’ve got enough going on, so just focus on that, okay?”

The blond vampire frowned at me, and slowly, the preternatural intensity in his expression faded. He started blinking as if he’d stepped into a ray of sunlight. After another moment, he shook his head and let out a breath. “Thanks for pulling me out of it. Shit. I’ve been an addict for years, and I’ve never felt anything like this.”

Like what? I wanted to say, probably out of morbid curiosity.

Laurie hadn’t stopped, though, and he was nearly at the other end of the hallway now. Tucking my questions away for a better time, I hurried after him. Gil matched my pace effortlessly. His steps were almost as subtle as a faerie’s, but the sound of my heels echoed. Combined with the long shadows and snatches of music from the distant party, there was an eerie feel clinging to this place.

Suddenly I wanted nothing more than to get away. Away from those walls, away from Belanor, away from faeries altogether.

The three of us turned a corner, and I lifted my head to gauge the distance between us and the exit. I discovered that the way to freedom wasn’t beyond a pair of doors, but rather a huge stone archway. It loomed up ahead, getting bigger with every step. I was too wary to admire it, or anything else we rushed past. Every piece of furniture felt like a threat. What if Belanor sent his cherubim after me?

Voices began to penetrate the stillness, small bursts of sound that hit the quiet like a staple going through paper. I faltered, thinking it was the guards that were after us, but Laurie brushed the back of my hand with his. I looked at him sharply. As usual, he offered no explanation. I could only see his profile, which revealed nothing.

We kept walking, and something stopped me from glancing over my shoulder. I tugged my hood down again as it occurred to me that my face was streaked in a dead faerie’s blood.

The noise drew closer and closer, and it became apparent that multiple conversations were happening at once. I heard snatches of their words amidst the confused buzzing in my head. A feminine voice talked about an investment app. A deeper one soon cut in, saying, “I’m not giving you a single euro, Pink. No, don’t. I’m not falling for this again.”

In the next moment, we were overtaken by them. The conversations around us didn’t pause or fade. Gil walked closer to me so no one could come between us, but on my other side, Laurie still didn’t react. A male with orange hair started describing, in explicit detail, a cock he’d just sucked on the previous night. He was acting as if we weren’t here, I observed silently. Had Laurie used his abilities to hide us from sight?

“No time for introductions, I’m afraid,” he murmured, making me jump. “It looks like Morelli managed to get the Guardians at the front posted elsewhere, but there’s no way of knowing how long that’ll last now.”

Now that Morelli is dead. That was what he wasn’t saying.

We were in the final phase of Laurie’s plan, I realized. The archway waited ahead, and just as he’d claimed, I was about to walk out the front door, so to speak.

So these loud strangers must’ve been Laurie’s inner circle.

I felt such a rush of curiosity that I was powerless against it, and it swept me along in its tide. I counted the number of figures around us. All six wore cloaks identical to mine, but only two had their hoods up. The other four didn’t try to avoid notice—maybe they had less to lose if they were discovered helping me. Or maybe they’d just been at the party and it was perfectly acceptable to be seen leaving the palace.

Undeterred by hoods or the possibility of being caught staring, I studied the face of every person that had come at Laurie’s call, in spite of the potential risk. They didn’t seem nearly as interested in doing the same; their overlapping discussions continued and none of them looked my way.

“Not sure what all the fuss is about,” I heard someone mutter, pitching their voice too low for me to discern which direction it had come from. But I had no trouble hearing a snort of agreement to my right, coming from the lumberjack wannabe.

Old instincts leaped into my mouth, and I opened it to cut the speaker down. Something made me pause. After another moment, I swallowed the

words down and kept studying the people that Laurie trusted most in the world, putting everything else from my mind.

From what I could tell, the group was evenly divided between males and females. The first male I'd noticed, of course, was the orange-haired, self-described cock sucker, who I suspected of making that remark about me a few seconds ago. Pointed ears peeked out between the vibrant strands of his mane.

The figure he spoke to was the tallest out of all of them, and I caught a glimpse of light reflecting off his eyes. *Werewolf*, I thought. He had tumbling brown hair, a beard, and broad shoulders. Though I had no way of knowing what he wore beneath his cloak, my mind conjured the image of a checkered shirt and an ax, completing the lumberjack look.

The last male walked silently behind us. From the less-than-furtive glances I stole, I noted that his lips were thin, the planes of his cheeks smooth and flat. Dark hair fell to his shoulders in layers, and diamonds gleamed in his earlobes. *Faerie*, I noted.

For the females, the one walking to my left owned the voice that had been talking about investments earlier, I was sure of it. *Pink*, the dark-haired male had called her. Her dark eyes were bright with intelligence as they darted around beneath her hood. A splash of color caught my attention, and I glanced down, noting the pretty blue gown that vanished and reappeared with every step through the folds of her cloak. Her black hair was in a long, thick braid. Though her body wasn't visible, I could see that she was a little person—the top of her head was even with my chest. I couldn't find any hints for her species.

The second female was fae, evident in her pointed ears and the weightless way she walked. Her hair was pulled back in an elegant chignon. Her eyebrows were flawless, dark arches and she wore red lipstick, which contrasted strikingly with her tawny skin. She wore earrings that looked like real gold.

The last was an alarmingly thin creature. She couldn't be a witch, since Laurie had lost access to all of his. Her hair was long and blond, scraped back into a ponytail that hadn't seen water or shampoo in days. There were gray smudges beneath her blue eyes, and her cheekbones were overly sharp, as if she'd just survived a long illness. There was nothing weak or unclear in the way she looked back at me, though. I knew, just as certainly

as I'd known it when I met Maria, that she loved the silver-haired faerie walking between us.

All of Laurie's comrades were striking, or stunning, or both. I couldn't help but wonder if the Seelie Prince was subconsciously drawn to his friends, at least in the beginning, because he was drawn to beautiful things, as he'd said earlier tonight.

We were nearly at the archway now. Reluctance fluttered in my belly; I knew it was time to say goodbye. Time to leave the side of this infuriating, unexpectedly kind faerie prince who had saved me once again. Forcing everyone to stop, I turned to Laurie and raised my gaze, still uncertain what I was about to say, especially in front of an audience. I just knew I had to say *something*.

But once again, Laurie wasn't paying any attention to me. He accepted a cloak from one of the faeries behind us, and when he pulled it back, his bare wrist brushed against mine. Just for an instant.

"Thank you, Sir Robert," Laurie said. His gaze finally moved to mine. He raised his eyebrows as if to say, *Yes? May I help you?*

"What are you doing?" I whispered, watching him put the cloak on. "I thought the plan was for you to stay here, make sure you're seen in the palace."

"The plan changed the second Belanor just let you go," Laurie said, pulling the hood over his head. Smart—that signature silver hair would get us noticed in an instant if he didn't cover it.

No, wait. Consequences. Every action had consequences. I couldn't let him do this. Even if Belanor knew about Laurie's involvement now, and he made an accusation of treason, Laurie could cast doubt in people's minds if he didn't act guilty. He wouldn't help his case by leaving with me.

I didn't even get a chance to open my mouth before Laurie added, "No time for one of our rounds, Firecracker. Let's go."

He propelled me toward that enormous archway, and in those few steps, his friends casually surrounded us again, Gil included. Their behavior didn't change in the slightest. Their conversations continued. Their stances remained relaxed and unhurried as we made our way over the threshold and into the night. *That's part of the strategy*, I thought. We were just guests leaving the party. We had nothing to hide.

My nostrils flared as I inhaled fresh air for the first time in days. The stars greeted us, so aloof and oblivious to our plights. Our strange group

started down the driveway. I walked stiffly, my nails digging into my palms as I waited for one of the guards to call after us or sound an alarm.

Nothing happened.

The night was starless and cold. The road had been salted, clearing the gravel of ice, but it still glittered with a layer of fresh snow. Every few seconds, faint but vicious gusts moved past, raking over my skin like small claws. I looked up at Laurie, my breath forming clouds in the air between us. “Is it just me, or was that too easy?”

“Well, now you’ve done it.” He glared back. “You practically just begged them to—”

Belanor’s crisp voice drifted past. “Going somewhere, brother?”

Every single person in our group stopped. The heavy cloak twisted around my legs as I turned, dread forming like a stone inside of me. Gil’s side of the bond pulsed.

Belanor stood before the palace, a huge mass of Guardians gathered at his back.

It wasn’t surprising no one on my side had heard their approach, not with the distance and the wind in our ears. From this vantage point, the picture Belanor and his guards made was striking and detailed: every figure dressed in full armor, plumes of breath coiling through the air like smoke or mist. Their swords caught the light coming from the largest palace windows. There were so many Guardians that the mass of armed, immortal soldiers formed a curved shape, the ends of which were too close to us for my liking.

There was no point in Laurie sifting, since he’d already exposed his involvement in the library, but I still braced myself to see him disappear. Especially when courtiers began to trickle outside, probably drawn by the sight of a small army gathered on the front lawn.

He didn’t.

“Lady Sworn started to feel unwell during our dance, so I am merely escorting her home,” Laurie called, the lines of his body loose and unconcerned. While he paused, pasting on an expression of confusion, I peeked over at Gil. His breathing seemed to be steady, I was relieved to note. “Is there a problem, Your Majesty?”

Belanor’s eyes flickered at the title; he was probably wondering, like I was, whether it was meant to be an insult or strategic flattery. His scarred

features revealed nothing else as he replied, “There was a murder this evening. The dagger they found belonged to one of the guests.”

Laurie made a sound of sorrow deep in his throat. “How tragic. Was the victim someone we know?”

“It was a member of the Royal Guard. The killer dropped their weapon as they fled. Interestingly, Lord Arthion had reported this dagger as stolen minutes before the murder took place. But we have witnesses who claim he never left the room. Upon further investigation, an officer discovered traces of Lady Sworn’s scent in the same place where the body was found. I’d like to detain her for questioning.”

I heard Laurie curse under his breath, and I suppressed the same urge—Belanor was smarter than we’d given him credit for. He couldn’t have known Laurie would kill a Guardian in our escape, but he was using the loss of his pawn to reach his endgame.

Getting me back.

Laurie was probably worried I’d blurt something we’d all regret, because he didn’t pretend to consult me or consider Belanor’s request. “I’m afraid Lady Sworn has had a long evening,” he said. “You know how much importance Mother puts on being the perfect hostess. We wouldn’t want her to find out we detained an ill guest—can’t you already imagine the look of disappointment on her face?”

The attempt at camaraderie rolled off Belanor like a drop of water on wax. “I am the future King of the Seelie Court. Are you disobeying my command, Prince Laurelis?” he called, his voice getting swallowed by the night.

I had no trouble detecting the tone he used, though. It was one I’d heard often toward the end of my imprisonment with him, and hearing it again made my resolve harden—I wouldn’t be going back. I had already decided, before I’d even gotten free, that I would rather die than be at Belanor’s mercy again. Slowly, I leaned to the side and reached down, taking my heels off one by one. The gravel was freezing against the soles of my feet.

“What the fuck is she doing?” I heard one of Laurie’s friends whisper.

“You could be the king of this entire dimension and I still wouldn’t bow to you, Belanor.” Laurie had dropped all pretense now, and his voice dripped with dislike. I’d never seen him look at someone with such contempt.

It had the effect of dropping a match on a puddle of gasoline.

Belanor's eyes blazed, and he turned his head to address the line of Guardians behind him. Spittle flew from his mouth as he hissed, "Seize them."

Now I did swear.

Several of the guards peeled away from the others and started coming toward us, crossing the expanse of driveway between us as if it were a battlefield. Their leisurely pace felt like an insult. Gil dropped into a squat, baring his teeth in a soundless hiss. I gathered all my power to me in an instant, instinctive reaction, and I held the letter opener up. It wasn't a sword, but it could still slice throats.

"Spare as many as you can," Laurie said to the warriors behind us. His eyes were darker than normal, a slate gray instead of silver. It struck me, then, the reality of what he was doing for me—these had been his guards, once. His people. Of course he wouldn't want to kill any of them if it could be helped. Laurie's friends probably knew faeries in the Royal Guard, as well.

I glanced over my shoulder, wondering if I'd see resentment in their faces. That was when I saw that every single member of Laurie's inner circle had brandished weapons between the flaps of their cloaks or coats. Surprise flickered at the back of my mind when I saw the dark-haired male holding two guns, since it was unusual for a faerie to embrace technology of any kind. Cell phones were the exception, and it was typically only the younger ones who had them.

In the next breath, I realized I'd been wrong about all of them having a weapon—there was one amongst Laurie's friends who didn't appear to be holding anything. It was the female with the bright lipstick and the Ice Queen expression. I looked up from her empty hands and found her gazing back at me.

"Do you have any way of defending yourself?" I asked bluntly. I was aware of the others watching, but I didn't acknowledge them and neither did the Ice Queen.

Her lovely face still didn't shift or reveal anything as she replied, "Not against a legion of Guardians, no."

"I've got Caroline," the lumberjack put in, stepping closer.

I ignored him. With a single movement, I flipped the letter opener around and pointed the hilt toward Caroline, as he'd called her. "It's not

much," I said, "but it could come in handy. Oh, wait, hold on."

Using the fingers my shoes still dangled from, I lifted my dress. Then, with my other hand, I rammed the letter opener through the layers of lace and linen. The sound of tearing mingled with the noise of clanking armor. Once there was a sizable hole, I clamped the thin blade between my teeth and tore the skirt wide open, exposing my legs to the open air. Finished, I grasped the letter opener and held it out to Caroline a second time.

The faerie accepted it slowly, her painted fingernails peeking out from the cloak. "What will you use?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I'll improvise. I'm good at it, don't worry."

Caroline said nothing else. Facing forward again, I glanced at Laurie, curious whether he'd be using his abilities to stack the odds in our favor. His mouth was tight as he gave a barely perceptible shake of his head. "We need to surrender," Laurie said under his breath.

My nostrils flared. *"What?"*

Gil was looking at Laurie, too, along with all the people standing at our backs. This time, the prince addressed everyone. "We can't leave this driveway. Surrendering will buy us time. Do you trust me or not?"

It was a rhetorical question; the first cluster of Guardians was almost upon us. Laurie wanted time? Fine, I'd get him some time. But I sure as hell wasn't surrendering. Not to Belanor.

Barefooted now, I walked toward the oncoming cluster of Guardians. The moment I was close enough, I brought my arm back and used my entire body in the violent strike forward. Just as I'd planned, I jabbed the first male in the throat with one of the heels I held.

I didn't put enough force in my arm to impale him, but he choked and doubled over. Then I was swinging out with the heel in my other hand, doing the exact same thing to the Guardian attempting to come up behind me. Blood sprayed my face again, and I blinked. *Oops*. The heels must've been sharper than I thought—it was lodged in the side of his throat now. He'd heal, I reminded myself.

But now I was down one weapon.

Make that two, I thought as I made the same mistake again with the third Guardian flying at me, his sword upraised to hit me with the butt of the hilt, most likely.

The instant he went down, I saw Belanor make a furious gesture. Several more faeries separated from the multitude.

“Cock Sucker,” I snarled, whipping my head around. The redhead raised his eyebrows and pointed both his index fingers toward his face, as if to say, *Me?* I held out my hand and twitched my fingers. “I know you have a knife in one of your boots. Loan it to me and I won’t kill you later for that comment you made in the hallway. I’d been planning on using your fear of geese to break you, stopping only when you called out for your mommy, but now I’m feeling generous.”

I had finally gotten the inner circle’s attention. I could feel every single one of them staring at me as I kept my hand stretched out, waiting for the male to make his choice. He didn’t take long—two seconds later, he stooped and reached into his cloak, pulling out a dagger with a dragon-shaped hilt.

“For what it’s worth, I think I’m starting to see why there’s fuss now,” the redhead offered as I wrapped my fingers around it.

I met his gaze. “Good. Remember that if I get you killed in the next ten minutes.”

Then the next wave was on us. I reacted too slowly, and the bearded male moved in a blur, cutting down a Guardian just as he tried to bring the butt of his sword down on my skull. The smaller male hit the gravel, blood flying through the chaos. There were already two more to replace him. I uttered a mindless, ragged battle cry and whirled, raising the knife I’d commandeered.

Despite weeks without training, my muscles knew what to do, and I gave myself over to the familiar movements. By some miracle, I managed not to fall or get stabbed. There was nothing beautiful about this dance. It wasn’t delicate or graceful, either. It was just adrenaline, and blood, and shouts of pain. As I fought, I remained painfully aware of my bare feet, vulnerable to every heavy boot or patch of ice. I swung again and again, always confronting a new face or an oncoming assault.

Within seconds, I caught on that they were trying to capture me alive, just as I was attempting to spare their lives. For once I was glad faeries were difficult to kill, because it meant I didn’t need to feel any guilt about cutting their throats open or stabbing them in the armpits, one of the few places where their armor left a sliver of flesh exposed.

At long last, I came to an abrupt, breathless stop. There were no more Guardians rushing in our direction—Belanor had finally figured out that sending them in small bursts was ineffective—but the rest of the mass had

made their way closer while we were distracted. They'd moved around Belanor, almost obscuring him from my view.

My chest heaved as I comprehended the gravity of our situation. Now we were surrounded, in addition to being outnumbered.

"Stop making a spectacle, please," Belanor called. "Surely you can see you have no chance."

I didn't react; I was too busy evaluating the others. No one in our party had been hurt. If we took on the horde fighting for Belanor, I knew that would change.

Laurie was already grieving for Morelli. Gil had lost his life once. There would be no more sacrifices tonight, not for my sake.

Very well, then, I thought with an audible exhale. I knew what I had to do next.

I looked at Laurie, and he looked back, his expression inscrutable as ever. Doubtless he still wanted us to surrender, but I didn't need to think about it. It wasn't an option, not even for the sake of survival. Belanor had already taken too much. He would not get any more pieces of me, however small they may be.

"Not to him," I whispered, and my friend's silver eyes narrowed. "I'm sorry."

Thinking of how fast he could move—I had no way of knowing whether Laurie would protect his twin, when it came down to it—I turned back to the prince that we'd both vowed to kill.

I showed no mercy. Remembering every moment of pain, terror, and fury he'd caused me these past few days, I hurled myself into Belanor's mind.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was effortless.

I'd braced myself for a mental battle, but I was met without resistance—Belanor hadn't been guarded against me, probably because he'd thought so little of my capabilities. Until a few seconds ago, he'd still believed I was human.

All of that was about to change.

To his credit, Belanor recovered quickly. But it was too late. Just as he started to resurrect his mental walls, I tore into his secrets like the Leviathan used to cut through the water. I didn't try to be gentle or subtle.

Every time I used my abilities, the workings of my own mind shifted. In a way, it was like arriving at a fork in the road. Where most people chose a path, I split myself into two parts and went down both. So, even though one half of me was inside Belanor's head, the other half was still aware of everything happening outside of it. I saw his physical body stiffen, and suddenly, killing him wasn't enough.

I wanted to be looking into his eyes as the light faded from them.

Without a word to anyone, keeping my mental claws buried in the Seelie Prince's psyche, I began to stride forward.

Though I doubted any of the Guardians had guessed what was happening, they reacted instantly, shifting to defend their future king. Laurie's friends leaped in motion, too, fighting back against the tide, shielding me as I walked. My feet made wet sounds against the ground, strangely loud in my ears amidst all the clashing swords and pained shouts. Only twice did I have to stop, once ducking a sword and the other to find my way around a wounded Guardian crawling over the ground.

I was nearly upon Belanor now. At some point during my invasion, the faerie prince had fallen to his knees. Guardians clustered around him, over a dozen swords pointing in my direction. Their minds shone at the edge of my own like lights on the water, and I reached for them without thinking.

Not so long ago, I'd learned my victim's fears through touch. Now, I discovered, I could claim them with a single impulse.

Not only was I a Nightmare again, I had come back as a more powerful one.

There was no time to be disconcerted by the revelation. Flavors coated my tongue and frantic cries filled my ears as I returned my focus to Belanor. His guards had abandoned him, each one too preoccupied with what I was making them see. One thought he was being eaten alive by a grizzly bear; another was surrounded by a dozen giggling clowns. A path was open to the prince now, and he was also trapped in a haze of pain and disorientation.

I closed the rest of the distance between us. Belanor couldn't see me, but I smiled down at him. He knelt on the frozen pavement, looking resplendent in his finery, the two halves of his face slack and dull. I didn't touch him as I continued my unseen exploration. Not yet.

Disappointingly, the prince's mind wasn't as structured or impressive as others I'd seen—it was a typical jumble of moments and thoughts, interspersed with odd spots of darkness. The darkness made me uneasy, so I avoided it. As with most creatures, Belanor's phobias were the first thing I encountered. He was afraid of pain, public humiliation, and small dogs. The flavor on my tongue was a revolting combination of lemons and… was it rotten eggs? No, that wasn't right.

"Wait," Belanor said out loud. His stiff voice sounded far away. Pausing, I blinked and focused on Belanor's upturned face. I relaxed when I saw that his eyes were rolled back in his skull. It was actually pretty impressive that he'd managed to speak at all. Then he added, "Please."

"That's right," I crooned, kneeling in front of him, so close that our knees almost touched. Knowing some part of Belanor would feel it, I buried my fingernails deep into his temples. All around us, the battle raged on. "Beg for your life. Beg for mercy as I did. But it didn't help me… just like it's not going to help you."

I didn't even give him the dignity of responding. Belanor's gasp sounded in my ears as I went deeper, further into the dark, seeking what

truly frightened this faerie. The things he saw in his worst dreams.

Within seconds, though, I faltered. *There's something back there*, I thought. Something even darker than the gaps of emptiness and swirling shadow. I shied away from it, then turned away completely, too unnerved to explore it further.

I kept going, and soon I stumbled upon a different sort of memory. One that occupied a bigger portion of Belanor's psyche than the others.

The moment I began to watch, I felt the truth within the very fibers of the images—this day was significant to Belanor, somehow. The air stank of fear, triumph, and awe, though I couldn't determine which of these emotions were from the child or the adult version of him.

For this was a memory from his childhood, I realized instantly. I stood in the Nymphenburg Palace again, a silent spectator as Belanor and Laurie ran past in a rush of bright hair and wild shouts. A child who could only be Lensa was ahead of them, the skirt of her long dress flying. They were in a hallway I hadn't seen before. Along one wall, flames quivered and spit in a fireplace of white marble. On the other side, beyond the three faeries, through the floor-to-ceiling windows, snow covered the ground and the sky was an austere, glittering white. Every detail was like something from a film.

I returned my attention to the scene playing out before me. Lensa had nearly reached the far doorway now, and Laurie was on her heels. Belanor pumped his small arms, breathing hard as he tried to catch up. But halfway down the length of the room, he tripped on the laces of his shoes. The young prince hit the hard floor, landing on his hands and knees.

His face only registered the pain for an instant before he was scrambling back to his feet. "Wait for me, Laurelis!" Belanor cried in Enochian.

But his twin was already vanishing through the doorway, the echoes of his laughter all that remained. Making a frustrated sound, Belanor started to go after them. I moved closer, sensing that the pivotal event was about to occur.

"Prince Belanor," a voice called.

He paused, his head cocking. Searching for the speaker, Belanor's silver eyes moved past every doorway within the enormous hall. His face, I noted, was smooth and unmarked.

A tall figure stood in the one closest to him.

If I had to guess, I'd say the female was in her late twenties or early thirties. Her skin was pasty, her cheeks and forehead marked by strange tattoos, black dots that lined her eyebrows, cheeks, and chin. Her blond hair was braided and she wore a dress of red satin, the neckline trimmed with brown fur. She was not a faerie—the tips of her ears were round, and her features entirely ordinary—but power rolled off her like mist. I resisted the instinct to take a step back, reminding myself this wasn't real. Not for me, at least.

"Who are you?" Belanor asked. His expression was caught halfway between curiosity and caution.

I expected her to give him a sweet smile, but she only inclined her head as she answered, "I am a witch. I serve your mother. She sent me to see you, in fact. Would you like to see your future, Prince Belanor?"

Hearing this, he went still, and it was obvious that she'd piqued his interest. Belanor knew his brother would be king someday, and that knowledge had always left his own future unknown. Though his instincts urged him to go after his siblings, Belanor couldn't resist the witch's offer.

Which was exactly what she wanted, I thought, an alarm blaring in my head. She looked exactly as Savannah had in Denver, when she'd opened her door and we laid eyes on each other for the first time in years. Overly thin, skin drained of color and vitality. Classic signs, I'd learned, of dark magic. My stomach clenched, and I wished I could warn the small prince. At that moment, he wasn't Belanor to me—he hadn't yet become the person that would brand my body and bruise my soul.

"Come closer to the fire," the witch bid, gesturing with one long-fingered hand.

Belanor hesitated. His gaze darted between her and the flames, his thoughts racing. He wasn't afraid, exactly, but he was Fallen. We had been in hiding for millennia, and most of us were born with a natural ability to know when we were being hunted.

"I changed my mind," he declared, stepping back. "I would like to go now."

I expected the witch to pander or persuade. Instead, moving faster than I knew her kind could, she snatched hold of Belanor's arm and started dragging him. "There's nothing to fear, Your Highness! The Reading won't take more than a minute or two, and your siblings will be so envious, wouldn't you agree?"

She tried to disguise her impatience with a close-lipped smile, but there was an edge in her voice. Belanor heard it, too, and he wrenched away with a strength the witch clearly didn't expect, because she lost her grip on him. The sound of his tearing sleeve filled the stillness.

"Unhand me!" Belanor cried. He began to turn, shouting as he did, "Guards!"

Dropping all pretense, the witch grabbed the prince again and swung him around. They struggled. Belanor opened his mouth to call for help again, but the witch muttered something, and he gasped as if she'd punched him in the gut. A coughing fit wracked his frail body, making it all the more impressive when he managed to tear himself free a second time.

Then, unable to check his momentum, Belanor went tumbling into the fire.

There was a grate in front of the crackling heat, but that toppled over as if it weighed nothing. Belanor's body was on top of the grate as he fell. It protected most of him from the flames, but not, I saw with a wince, his small face.

The child's screams filled the cavernous room, so piercing that they hurt my ears even now, decades later. I wished I could clap my hands over them. At least I knew why this memory was so significant—it was the day Prince Belanor Dondarte had gotten his scars. Why had he told me a neglectful nursemaid was to blame?

Swearing through her teeth, the witch yanked the child away from the heat. Belanor was still screaming, and I averted my gaze, unable to stomach the sight.

Then his screams changed, and I forced myself to look again. Taking advantage of Belanor's inability to fight back, the witch had pinned him to the floor. There must've been a knife hidden on her person, because there was one in her hand now. She used her other to yank Belanor's shirt down, exposing the smooth skin of his chest. She muttered under her breath as she worked, and I recognized Enochian words.

She was working a spell, but this was no Reading.

Suddenly I felt a burst of pain, and not even the magic high could soften it. The sensation was similar to someone planting their hands on my chest and using all their strength to push—if I'd really been standing in the memory, I would've stumbled backward.

Belanor was fighting me.

I drew more power to myself and imagined digging my heels in, but then he shoved me again. This time, it propelled me out of the prince's head entirely.

I returned to myself with a grimace. I was standing over Belanor, and we were still surrounded by chaos. Laurie's friends were holding their own, due in large part to the lumberjack, the dark-eyed male with the gun, and the greasy-haired female. Every time a shot went off, it seemed as if the sound was swallowed by the night sky. *The gun must have a silencer on it*, I thought distantly as I refocused on Belanor. I readied myself to go back into his head.

"How?" he rasped. His eyes were dull with pain, but this faerie continued to surprise me with his resilience.

The question made me pause. I searched Belanor's expression, frowning. Past the pain, there was a familiar, burning intensity in the depths of his gaze. The moment I saw it, I realized that he just wanted to know which one of his tortures had worked. This faerie was on his knees, at my mercy, and that was all he cared about.

Gritting my teeth, I moved my hands from Belanor's temples to bury them in his hair. I yanked his head back, exposing his throat, as if I meant to slice a sword across it. One of his guards saw what I was doing and shouted someone's name, probably a Guardian that was closer to us. But every faerie around us was either unconscious, injured, or struggling against the manifestations of their phobias.

Knowing that time was not on my side, I allowed myself a moment to consider how I should proceed.

Whether Belanor had been lying to me about how he got his scars, or his subconscious had altered the truth to protect him, I couldn't be sure. I *was* sure about the Seelie Prince's fear of fire, though. I thought of how the fireplace had always been unlit during my time in that gilded prison. Funny how fear often revealed itself in the smallest, quietest ways. Ways that were all-too easy to miss if you weren't looking for them.

I considered making Belanor believe he was being burned alive, but it wasn't enough. Not after everything he'd done. Though every second came with a potential, devastating cost, I dove back into the prince's mind. Belanor's mental wall was back in place, but it was no match against my cold fury; I punched a hole through it, barely flinching. My victim made a

sound of pain that I ignored, and I clawed past the echoes of the witch's spell in search of other days or moments Belanor was hiding.

A moment later, I found what I was looking for—a myriad of memories were grouped together, all of them practically sang with terror. I darted through each one, absorbing the images and truths they held as quickly as possible. Every memory shared a common denominator: Laurie.

I felt myself smile as I realized the heir to the Seelie throne *did* have a weakness, and it was so obvious that I should've discovered it sooner. His greatest fear was one he'd lived nearly every day of his life, explaining why there were so many memories clustered here.

Above all else, Belanor dreaded being compared to Laurie… and coming up short.

I didn't hesitate. Not anymore. For the first time since regaining my powers, I brought someone's darkest fear to life, and it was as easy as taking a breath.

I didn't insert myself in the illusion, as I had done with Nuvian once. No, this time I wanted my victim's horror to be pure, untainted, a feast of panic and unadulterated belief in what was happening. So when Prince Belanor Dondarte opened his eyes and found himself in Stone Hall, he couldn't see me. He only saw the pieces of information I'd gleaned from his mind, using his secrets against him just like he had used mine.

Belanor looked around with a frown. He knew something was off, but everything seemed to be in its place. This was another one of his mother's parties. He could remember seeing the cleaning staff earlier, scrubbing the floors of this room. He could still taste the glass of wine he'd had in his rooms in an effort to prepare himself for the inane chatter ahead, just before he put on the tail coat, trousers, dark waistcoat, white bow tie, and winged-collar shirt he now wore. The height of fashion, Belanor thought bitterly, and yet Laurie had outshone him for the millionth time by going against the grain and wearing a red jacket.

As per usual, no one could take their eyes off his beloved brother.

Belanor positively loathed these things. But Mother was trying to make nice with a powerful band of water nymphs from Brazil, and she wanted the royal family to present a united front. Since she was the one who would protect him once Laurelis took the throne, he needed her to remain fond of him.

The thought made Belanor sneer, and he ducked his head down to hide it. United front, indeed. Mab had requested his presence, and yet it was Laurelis who stood at her side, making a point of speaking to every dignitary or ambassador. Charming the courtiers with his silver tongue. Belanor caught the gleam of Laurie's perfect teeth as he laughed. Watching him, the younger Dondarte brother felt the usual stab of envy.

He'd put in enough time, Belanor decided. His presence had been noted by several guests and Mab had given him a brief, tender smile, her way of silently thanking him for attending. Before he could slip from the room, though, a figure sidled up beside him.

It was Iris, although she was vastly younger in this memory. When I'd met her, the witch had looked like she was in her late twenties. This Iris could've passed for sixteen years old. Her skin was as smooth as a pearl and her green ballgown hugged a smaller body. She was Belanor's lover, I realized, the knowledge coming to me easily now. No wonder she had been so rough and cold during our interactions—she'd probably resented his obsession with me.

Ironic, considering that Belanor had always been afraid that Iris was secretly in love with Laurie, as everyone else was at their Court.

He's almost making this too easy, I thought.

Without a word to the prince, Iris turned and walked away, following the command of my magic. Belanor gritted his teeth, irritated that others may have seen Iris's departure as a spurn toward him. He knew if he left now, as he'd been planning, it almost certainly would.

Belanor's irritation gave way to disbelief as his lover threaded through the guests, stopped at Laurie's side, and tucked herself against his side. She stood on tiptoe to skim her lips along Laurie's cheek, his neck, the corner of his mouth. He didn't pause in his conversation with a blue-skinned female wearing a gown made of seashells, but he did put his arm around Iris's waist. After a moment, the witch turned her head and found Belanor again. There was an exalted gleam in her eyes.

She didn't say a word, but the curl to her lips conveyed everything. *You are nothing to me.*

Belanor's nostrils flared. I heard the roar of pain in his head, felt it in his chest. Seeing the two of them together, he couldn't help feeling as if Laurie was a bright flame and he was the ashes left behind. That was how

it had always been. But not how it would always be, Belanor promised himself desperately.

Hearing this, my smile returned. *Wrong again,* I crooned to him.

Belanor stiffened and his eyes widened. I didn't give him a chance to react, and in the next moment, Mab materialized behind him. Belanor sensed her and spun, opening his mouth to warn her away. But then, in the space of time between rapid heartbeats, everything in the throne room shifted.

Everyone was facing in one direction, and Mab stood behind Belanor now. They were in the middle of the crowd, facing the enormous wall of windows. It felt like the breath caught in my throat when I saw what they were looking at.

Laurie sat on the throne.

He was… magnificent. There was no other word for it. The sun shone behind him, casting streams and ribbons of light in every direction. It bounced off tiles and jewelry, lending the room even more iridescence. This, I knew, was how everything had truly looked on the day of his coronation—after all, I was only using the imagery from Belanor's head. Laurie wore a suit of white and gold, so decadent, so ridiculous that it shouldn't have looked good. But with his silver hair and strong shoulders, it worked. A crown of silver antlers adorned his brow. He gripped the armrests lightly, his hands loose and still. Rings gleamed on his fingers.

"I love him more than you," Mab purred in Belanor's ear. He darted a glance at her, but his mother's vivid green eyes were fixed on Laurie, making it impossible to misunderstand who she meant.

Six words. Six short, simple words, and they had the power to send a crack through Belanor's mind as a rumble of horror and pain shook the very foundation of his being. They were the exact words he'd always dreaded. If I were feeling charitable, I might have told him that the truth was just the opposite—Mab loved Belanor so much she hadn't kept enough for her other adopted children.

Unfortunately for Belanor, I wasn't feeling charitable.

He stood there, staring at the apparitions of his worst fears. Laurie, Mab, and Iris didn't even bother to look back at him. That was when I finally appeared in front of the crumbling prince. He stepped back, startled. I allowed him to recognize me as I stepped close and smiled into his eyes.

“Again,” I whispered.

Then Belanor blinked, and I was gone.

He looked around with a frown. He knew something was off, but everything seemed to be in its place. This was another one of his mother’s parties. He could remember seeing the cleaning staff earlier, scrubbing the floors of this room. He could still taste the glass of wine he’d had in his rooms in an effort to prepare himself for the inane chatter ahead, just before he put on the tail coat, trousers, dark waistcoat, white bow tie, and winged-collar shirt he now wore.

Still smiling, I removed myself from the illusion. I blinked hard once, twice to realign the parts of myself that had briefly separated. When the world solidified, I saw that Belanor was on the ground now. He stared up at the night sky, his eyes hollow, his mouth open in a silent scream.

Gil appeared at my side, the bottom half of his face completely covered in blood. What had once been a white shirt was a deep, periwinkle blue. His voice was guttural and unrecognizable as he said, “Time to go.”

“Wait.” I resisted when he grasped my arm and gave it a none-too-gentle pull. “He’s still alive.”

The vampire responded, but I didn’t hear it—my attention was riveted on Belanor’s chest. The movement was so subtle I’d almost missed it, a soft rise and fall that indicated breath. Looking down at him, it occurred to me that Belanor would never be more vulnerable than he was in this moment.

The same thing had occurred to Gil, as well. “Shall I take care of him, then?” he questioned.

“No.” The answer was immediate and involuntary. I frowned at the sleeping prince, wondering why I was hesitating again. If I picked up one of the discarded swords around us and finished what I’d started, I would be ridding the world of a monster. A monster that had been on the verge of gaining even more power.

There was a sword next to my foot. The blade was clean—its owner had either been struck down before he could use it, or he was still in the throes of my power. I knelt and picked the weapon up. I was prepared for its weight, but going so long without exercising had weakened me. I had to use both hands to put it over Belanor’s throat. My muscles tensed. The Seelie Prince just laid there, his face frozen in a twisted expression of horror.

Choose Mercy, Fortuna.

Collith's voice sounded without warning, making me jump. I held the sword there for one more beat. *Goddamn it*, I thought with a rush of hot fury. Slowly, I lowered my hand, exhaling through my teeth. Collith was locked away in the deepest, darkest dungeon there was, and he was still managing to annoy me. My voice of reason, my wisdom, my reminder to do good, in spite of all the bad he'd done. If he were here, I'd be tempted to use this sword on him, too.

"Fortuna, if you're not going to kill him, then let's *go*." Gil's voice was sharp with urgency. I raised my head and instantly saw why.

More guards were pouring out of the palace. Laurie's friends were waiting halfway down the driveway, a fearsome-looking cluster of warriors with bloodied weapons and thunderous expressions. I faced Gil, about to agree to his suggestion when someone else grabbed my hand. My head whipped to the side. Power rose inside me like tentacles, ready to defend. But it was only Laurie, his eyes burning bright, his head inclined in a silent command. *Run.*

I was about to obey when I spotted a familiar figure rushing toward Belanor's prone form.

Both Laurie and Gil pulled me backward, inserting several feet of distance between us and Iris. I didn't fight them. I didn't need to be close to her to defend us, and the witch only had eyes for her lover, anyway. She went down on her knees slowly, and her expression dulled when she saw his face. Mouthing his name, she touched Belanor's chest with both of her hands, as if she could will his vitality back. He didn't stir. After another moment, Iris looked up at me, tears gleaming on her cheeks.

The moment our gazes met, she went still. Her lips parted with awe. Seeing that reminded me this was the first time we'd seen each other since I'd gotten my powers back, and I felt my own lips curve with anticipation. I pulled my hands free from Laurie and Gil as I waited for the awe to pass.

Unsurprisingly, it didn't take longer than two or three seconds. Iris had figured out who I was, of course—the scene surrounding us made it fairly obvious, even if she couldn't see my true face anymore. I watched the witch's face tighten as the usual parade of reactions marched through her. Desire. Envy. Hate.

I waited until our eyes locked again. Moving quickly, I reached up and removed the rose from behind my ear. It had already begun to wilt. I

tossed it onto the snow between us, like an omen. Then I said, not bothering to hide the relish in my voice, “I look forward to watching you break.”

With that, I sent a fresh surge of power into Belanor’s mind, strengthening whatever remained of the illusion that had claimed him. The unconscious faerie shuddered, and a fresh line of blood slid out of his nose.

As Iris’s wail rose into the night, I turned back to Laurie, who looked equal parts exasperated and admiring. Understandable, considering the next wave was almost on us. His fingers wrapped around mine again—I felt a burst of warmth and power, but as always, nothing more than that—and we broke into a sprint. I was still holding the sword I’d intended to kill Belanor with.

In an instant, I remembered that I wasn’t wearing shoes. Tiny stones lodged in the soles of my feet with every step, taunting me of this fact. Thankfully, I was buzzing with magic and energy, and what should’ve been painful was hardly more than a minor discomfort. Seconds later, we caught up with Laurie’s inner circle, and all of us flew down the driveway, toward the bright street, where buses and cars and bikes still filled the lanes, a wide moon shining above it all. There was another stone archway standing there, as well.

Then I blinked, and Guardians, dozens of them, suddenly stood between us and freedom. Apparently the loss of their commander hadn’t nullified their orders.

“Too many,” I muttered, my stomach sinking. I started to slow, raising the sword at the same time.

But Laurie tugged at me again. He didn’t even sound winded as he muttered back, “Wait for it.”

Another wave of frustration sluiced through me. Just *once*, it would be nice to know the plan before we rushed headlong into it. Still, I kept running, and Gil followed my lead. The others hadn’t so much as paused.

As we caught up to them again, I glanced over at the vampire. My focus lingered on the blood covering him. I could see the newborn’s deteriorating control without using the bond; his features had sharpened, including his fangs, and there was a sheen to his eyes as they caught the light, like an animal’s. Gil *wanted* to fight. He wanted the chance to tear these faeries open and gorge himself on their blood.

If we survived this, he and I would need to have a talk.

I'd barely finished the thought when pain shot through my ribs, and I released a ragged sound, drawing a sharp glance from Laurie. Without faltering, I flapped my hand at him. *I'm fine. Keep going.*

Then a roar cleaved the world in half.

Me, Laurie, Gil, and the members of his circle came to an abrupt halt. The lumberjack dug his boots into the ground so hard that his heels seemed to spew gravel. Every single head tilted back, including mine. I heard some of the guards mutter expletives and prayers. A shadow swooped over us, blocking out the moon like a solar eclipse. A gust of wind tossed my ponytail back and sent snow flying. I saw something flash in the air, and Laurie's arm moved in the corner of my eye—he'd caught a sword. The huge creature must've been carrying it.

It was the most beautiful blade I'd ever seen, but I barely spared it a glance. All my focus was fixed upward. As a sudden wind blew my hair back, a result of those powerful wingbeats, I felt a rush of intuition edged with the prickle of certainty.

"What did you say Tabitha was?" I breathed to Laurie.

His tone was a strange blend of satisfaction and awe. "I didn't."

I knew it was her. I wasn't sure how, because the dragon landing on that stone archway bore no resemblance to the female I'd met in Laurie's rooms. Her size was immense, equivalent to a small house, and there were barbs at the end of her great, sweeping tail. Stones crumbled like dust under her claws as she dug them in, leaning over the enormous battalion of warrior angels.

Her scales were black. Deep, obsidian black. They seemed to absorb the moonlight rather than reflect it—there was none of that beautiful, shimmering quality Cyrus's scales had displayed. She drew her head back, as if she were gaining momentum, and then her throat flexed. Her jaws gaped open and green fire came pouring out.

Feed your rage like a flame, she'd said to me. Tabitha was surprisingly straightforward; I should've realized she meant it literally.

The Guardians scattered, their cries of alarm ringing through the night. I stood there, seeing that moment with Cyrus again, frozen with terror and regret.

"Go!" Laurie snapped, yanking me forward with his free hand. Recovering, I wrenched my dress up again, silently vowing to opt for pants

from now on. I tightened my grip on the hilt of the sword still in my other hand. The driveway we ran over steamed from the heat and melted ice, and over our heads, I caught a glimpse of Tabitha rearing back for another surge of dragonfire.

She was giving us a head start. They all were, I noted with a start—Laurie's friends hadn't started running when we had. Instead, they stood with their backs to us, blades and guns at the ready. Any Guardians that managed to pass Tabitha would need to go through them, too.

The realization gave me a burst of strength. I kept pace with Laurie and Gil as we raced beneath the archway. Screams sounded from behind, but I didn't look back. We reached the street, and my bare feet slapped against the freezing pavement. Laurie seemed to hear this at the same moment I did, and I saw him glance down. Cursing, he stopped and reached for me, probably intending to carry me in spite of the heavy-looking sword he already held.

Tabitha roared again, and somehow, I heard a note of warning in the sound.

Laurie and I turned at the same time. Several Guardians were heading in our direction, but Tabitha's enormous, lethal body hadn't left the archway—a biker whizzed past, acting completely oblivious to the beast looming over him. Most likely, the illusion spell Belanor had mentioned only extended to the edge of the palace grounds. If there were sightings of a dragon in Munich, the humans would descend into chaos.

Which meant there wouldn't be any more help from Tabitha, not if she wanted to avoid exposing all of Fallenkind. The inner circle was also preoccupied, and I was glad to see each member holding their own.

I didn't remember running again, but then I was rushing after Gil and Laurie down a narrow street, the driver of a UPS truck honking his horn at us. Nightmares couldn't cast any sort of glamour, and I cast a single, fleeting thought about the strange picture I must've made flying past in a lacy ballgown and brandishing a medieval sword in one fist. Laurie seemed to have a destination in mind, and he led us down alleys and around corners, never faltering or offering explanation.

"Stop, in the name of the King!" someone shouted.

He's not king yet! I wanted to shout back, but the unfamiliar voice was too close for my liking. A backward glance told me that, in spite of our head start, the Guardians had gained ground on us and they were closing in

fast. We were on a quieter street now, with fewer cars and people to avoid. I could hear the clanking of armor and swords.

At the mouth of another alley, Laurie stopped and spun.

"Go," he said shortly, moving his head again to indicate we should get behind him. He spun the sword in an expert movement.

I glared. "We're not leaving—"

Gil grabbed my arm and pulled me into the narrow space behind Laurie. A strand of hair blew across my mouth as I looked wildly over my shoulder, desperate not to lose sight of him. I sensed a ripple of his power as he claimed several minds at once, making them see what he wanted them to see. It was strange that I kept sensing when Laurie used his abilities—maybe it was because I'd been in his head now. Because I'd gotten past his wall.

This alley led to a dead end; Gil and I reached a wall of dumpsters and whirled. At the other end, The Seelie Prince's body blocked most of the street, but I saw a cluster of oncoming Guardians jerk to a halt, their expressions twisting. Some with confusion, others with blank terror. Laurie was buying us time, too, I realized. He had a plan, he always had a plan. If one of them failed, he went right to the backup he'd put in place. He'd probably chosen this alley for a specific reason. But what were we waiting for? Was I supposed to be scaling the walls?

"Now what?" Gil muttered, echoing my thoughts.

I was on the verge of calling out to Laurie when he tossed something down the alley. He quickly faced forward again, his body tight with concentration. My gaze dropped to the objects he'd thrown at my feet.

Boots. They must've come off one of the Guardians Laurie was holding in his thrall—they were tipped with metal and made of high-quality leather. Leaning my stolen sword against the closest brick wall, I hurried to pull the boots onto my frozen, dirty feet. They were too big, but not by much. I'd still be able to run and fight, and that was all that mattered.

I had just finished putting the second one on when a hand clamped around my ankle.

I spun, a scream rising to my lips. It died when I saw none other than Peeks, his finger pressed against his mouth in a desperate bid for silence. He was half-standing out of a sewer hole, the round lid propped against his

shoulder. Jassin's son was lucky I hadn't been holding the sword, or his head might've gotten lopped right off his body.

Gil moved in a blur, probably to rip Peeks's head off anyway, and I threw my hand out with a frantic, "No, don't!"

The vampire froze, his eyes unnaturally bright again. He didn't take them off Peeks, who glared back with an expression that managed to be wary and defiant all at once.

"Can we go now?" he said. His long hair was scraped into a bun, exposing the shaved sides of his scalp. He wasn't wearing his Guardian armor, only a worn jean jacket. Before either Gil or I could respond, Peeks's gaze shifted, taking note of the figure still fighting at the mouth of the alley. "If Laurelis is coming, one of you should fetch him. Now."

Understanding dawned; he meant for us to go into the sewers.

Laurie must've set this up as one of his backup plans. My mind flashed back to the conversation we'd had last night.

Belanor will set a trap, Laurie had warned me.

Then we'll just have to be smarter than him, I'd said back.

If we'd relied on my arrogance, we probably wouldn't have made it past the driveway. Once again, Laurie had saved our asses. The thought made something in my chest tighten. Though he hadn't known Belanor would have an entire contingent of Guardians waiting for us, Laurie still put precautions in place, outsmarting his twin as effortlessly as he waltzed.

Peeks had probably been working with him this entire time. I wondered if Jassin's son had brought me food of his own volition or if Laurie had ordered him to. So many pieces. So many moving parts. Laurelis Dondarte was a force to be reckoned with, and I wouldn't forget that again.

But none of this mattered right now. Nothing mattered except getting out of here, and making sure no one got left behind.

"Laurie!" I hissed, reaching for the sword still propped against the side of a building. "*Laurie*."

His silvery head whipped toward me, and I watched him take note of Peeks and the manhole. He nodded once, hopefully to indicate that he'd follow us, then whirled to face another oncoming guard. He must've reached a limit to the minds he could influence, or he'd drained too much of his power, because Laurie raised his sword with a bright, taunting laugh, his hair streaming behind him in a gust of wind. I stared, wishing I could

stay. Watch him. Absorb the fairy tale picture he made, standing there on that ice-slickened street.

“Fortuna,” Gil said, his voice laced with urgency. “Let’s go.”

Blinking, I bent my head, breaking the strange spell Laurie had put over me. Using my free hand, I hurriedly got into the manhole. A smell rushed up, and it was so foul that my instincts reared, trying to recoil from that putrid stench. I gripped the edges of the manhole with white fingers, biting back a curse. Shit. That was human shit. And I was about to walk—maybe swim—through it.

Suddenly I regretted not killing Belanor.

We didn’t have time for this. With a swift, bracing breath, I started climbing down the ladder, fitting my new boots onto the rust-covered rungs. My stomach churned harder with each step, but I didn’t voice a single complaint out loud. There was little I wouldn’t do to get out of this city.

But the sword in my fist rattled as it hit the ladder, betraying the force of my dread. Breathing hard, I reached deep inside me and scooped courage out of darkness as if it were diamonds buried in the earth. Determined. Frenzied.

Once I was halfway down, Gil appeared at the top, blocking out the light as he followed. He closed the lid, and there was a finality in the sound that made anxiety flutter in my throat. I kept climbing as my mind filled with a single question. Where was Laurie?

I reminded myself that he could sift. Knowing Laurie, he’d probably show up when there was no more risk of ruining his suit.

A few seconds later, I reached the bottom of the ladder. The last rung seemed to hover over nothing but air. I looked down, but it was too dark to make anything out, even Peeks. The ladder shook now, along with my sword. Gil was coming down fast; there was no time for hesitation. I gritted my teeth and forced myself to let go.

Then I was plummeting into the bowels of Munich.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I landed in water.

I couldn't see much, but I could hear the sound plainly. Feel the cold shock of it splash against my boots. Down here, the smell was so strong that it took physical effort not to gag. I covered my nose and breathed through my mouth, moving away from the ladder so Gil could make the jump, too. He hit the water a moment later, but by then, my attention had gone to the small figure waiting a few steps away.

Peeks stood with his back to us. When he heard Gil's landing, the faerie turned, revealing a white-bulbed lantern clutched in his long fingers. Its light bounced off the round walls, making the smooth bricks gleam.

"What's your game?" I demanded without preamble. I hadn't forgotten the connection I made back in that cell, when I'd recognized Peeks's scent. He was the one who had stopped me from killing Belanor after I'd been pitted against Finn. Maybe if he hadn't, my werewolf would still be here and we could've been home by now. Gil moved to stand next to me, and I felt my nostrils flare as I continued, "You knock me unconscious, then you save my ass? Did Laurie just buy your loyalty for the night?"

"If you're referring to what happened in the arena, I kept you from revealing the return of your abilities," Peeks countered, his tone far less heated than mine. He had probably noticed the blood all over Gil and decided self-preservation was more important. "I didn't know the full extent of Belanor's plans for you—I still don't—but I knew he couldn't move forward with them as long as he believed you were human. I'm also the one who sent Vulen on his merry goose chase two weeks ago so he wouldn't be here to torment you. You're welcome, by the way."

Without waiting for a response, Jassin's son turned and plunged into the murky depths of the tunnel.

"Right. Well, the sooner we follow him, the sooner we can get out of here." Gil's voice was muffled, and I looked over to see that he'd mashed his arm over his face. To his vampiric senses, the stench must've been unbearable. Feeling a stab of genuine sympathy for him, I nodded and started down the tunnel. My irritation was still there, though, and it only heightened as the smell worsened. The water was ankle-deep, and I tried not to think about what was in it. Instead, I kept my focus on the light Peeks held aloft, using it like a lighthouse in the distance.

None of us spoke, and during our silent trek through the dark, the only sounds were cars sporadically passing overhead and ripples lapping against the walls. I knew Laurie would come eventually, and when he did, he'd probably materialize at my side. But knowing something didn't automatically give it power over the rest of the mind—I kept glancing over my shoulder, hoping to see the glint of silver hair or the flash of a devilish grin. Peeks led us deeper beneath the city, taking turn after turn, and there was no sign of either. Every once in a while, a sewer grate appeared overhead, allowing the glow of a streetlight or headlights sweeping past. The tunnel narrowed, forcing Gil to walk behind me for a time. Even then, I couldn't stop looking backward. *Come on, Laurie, where are you?*

What I found more annoying than his continued absence was the strength of my concern. Scowling, I faced forward and reminded myself that Laurie was a big boy. He was also hard to kill. Worrying about him was ridiculous.

"Looking for me?"

At the sound of that voice, I almost exhaled in relief, and only the fact that Laurie would hear kept it at bay. I couldn't hide how some of the tension visibly seeped from my shoulders, though. The tunnel had widened again, and Laurie now walked beside me. Gil trudged along behind us, still covering the lower half of his face. What I could see of his expression was miserable. Turning back around, I took in Laurie's profile. He was deep in thought; his brows were lowered and his lips slightly pursed. He'd discarded the cloak, and the sword Tabitha had brought dangled from a scabbard at his hip. The long blade was dark with blood. I looked away

quickly, remembering the shadow in Laurie's eyes as he'd said, *Spare as many as you can.*

"Do you know if your friends made it out?" I asked. Our boots sloshed through the water in a short-lived tandem.

Laurie didn't look at me as he spoke. "None of them were harmed or captured. Kruek will keep everyone is safe until it's determined that Belanor is dead."

I frowned. "Kruek?"

"The tall one."

My face cleared as I realized Kruek was the faerie I'd been comparing to a lumberjack. *He looks like a Kruek*, I thought. Out loud I said, "I'm really glad everyone in your circle is okay. Even Cock Sucker. I owe each one a debt for helping me, and I won't forget that. Now, about the shit we're literally wading through… how much longer can we expect to be down here? We never talked about what happens after our big escape. Is the plan to get to a Door?"

"Yes." Laurie finally turned his head. His eyes met mine, and the dark, pensive cast in them was gone. Seeing this, it felt like the knots inside me loosened and fell away. Then Laurie ruined it by adding, "But you can't go back to Granby, Fortuna. If Belanor recovers, that will be the first place he checks."

I sincerely doubted Belanor would recover this time, but his cleverer twin had taught me it was better to err on the side of caution. "You obviously have a place in mind," I ventured.

It had just been a guess, but Laurie hesitated—hesitation was so unlike him that I almost stopped. But Peeks was still plunging ahead, and Gil came up from behind, the narrow slits of his eyes making it obvious he was scowling. I didn't need a magical bond to know that his priority was getting out of these tunnels. I rushed to match Laurie's pace again. Once we were alongside each other again, he shot me an inscrutable look and said, "The only place my brother wouldn't dare to enter is the Unseelie Court."

Once again, I almost stopped. Gil gripped my shoulders with his burning hands and propelled me forward. I shrugged him off and matched Laurie's stride, never taking my eyes off him. "No. Please."

It was the *please* that made Laurie's jaw clench. Peeks and Gil must've also heard the shift in my voice, the vulnerability, because suddenly both

of them changed their pace. Space appeared around me and Laurie, lending the illusion of privacy. Peeks took his light with him, leaving the two of us into near-darkness.

“There’s nowhere else, Fortuna. I’m sorry,” Laurie said as soon as the others had left. His remorse seemed genuine, but I knew this faerie prince was an excellent actor. I glared up at his lovely face, trying to find any flicker or twitch that would give away some sort of game. Some hidden agenda he might have for bringing me back to the place where all of this had started.

“What about my family?” I demanded finally. I must’ve raised my voice, because it echoed down the wet tunnel. I forced myself to calm down before continuing. “Do you really believe he won’t hurt them while we’re cowering underground?”

Laurie shook his head. “That’s not the Seelie way. Harming your family would be too brutal, too ugly. The werewolf was fair game at the hospital because that was a battle.”

I scoffed, and bitterness hung off the sound like icicles. “Seriously? Should I list off the things Belanor has done to me the past few days? Brutal doesn’t even *begin* to cover it.”

“He did most of those things in private,” Laurie countered, his eyes darkening at the reminder. “Out of the public eye. No one in our Court—besides Belanor’s inner circle—knew you were here. The elders turn a blind eye on the Games, which is how he was able to continue hiding you afterward.”

Laurie’s grim expression made me bite back the first response that formed on my tongue, and I noticed how his normally sensual mouth looked like a slash. *He really believes the Unseelie Court is our best option*. Swallowing, I fixed my gaze on that swinging lantern up ahead and wished it were moonlight. There was no moonlight where Laurie wanted to go, either. I was so tired of being under the ground, away from everything bright and alive and hopeful.

“There has to be another place we can lay low,” I said abruptly. “Do you know how many people at the Unseelie Court want me dead? There won’t be a dozen Guardians to stand in their way anymore.”

Laurie didn’t look at me as he answered, “Better to face them than the psychotic heir to the Seelie throne.”

I was about to protest again, but the words died inside my throat. He was right, and I knew it. Not only did Belanor have the Royal Guard at his disposal, but he had an entire nest of cherubim beneath the palace, as well. What of my own formidability, though? I'd been able to use my abilities on an entire room of faeries, along with a clearing full of black market sellers. It stood to reason that I should be able to defend myself and my family against anyone that wanted to hurt us.

And yet… I didn't have complete control over that side of my power. It seemed to come and go, the force of it brought on by trauma or rage. I wasn't willing to bet on the lives of my loved ones.

While I accepted the fact that we'd be returning to the Court of Shadows, our small party pressed onward through the network of tunnels. The level of the water seemed ever-changing. The stench came and went, too. Peeks paused twice, and both times, he chose a direction with a sense of purpose that I found reassuring. He either knew these tunnels or he'd prepared for this, and none of us questioned him. Not even Laurie, who had never gone this long without speaking.

Normally I wouldn't think anything of it, considering where we were and all that had happened. There was something different about the way Laurie held himself, though—the tension in his shoulders, which were slightly slanted toward me, emanated anticipation more than fear—and I gave him a lingering glance.

Laurie glanced back. Our gazes caught and held, and I couldn't have pulled away if I tried. I watched Laurie's jaw set, as if he'd reached a decision of some kind. Before I could ask him about it, he finally voiced the question that must've been filling his head as we navigated these tunnels.

"Why didn't you kill him?" Laurie said.

Considering I'd spared quite a few lives recently, the confused look I gave him was genuine. "Kill who?"

"Belanor. Why didn't you kill him when you were inside his head?"

Laurie's voice didn't change, but the intensity in his eyes did. *Oh,* I thought. Now it was my turn to hesitate. The answer to this, a question that now consumed both of us, would feel like throwing a stick of dynamite on my life. I still hadn't recovered from the last explosion. I'd been hoping to completely avoid this conversation, but I knew Laurie wouldn't let that happen. When he wanted something, he was relentless. I'd begun to

understand that about him already, and seeing inside his head had only furthered my knowledge of it.

Which was why there was a note of resignation in my own voice when I replied, “Because I didn’t want to be the one to kill your brother, Laurie.”

“Why not?” he asked instantly. I’d known this was coming, too—it was as inevitable as a tide. Fear rose in me, and it felt like I could hear that dynamite crackling, the bright light burning rapidly downward.

Gil spoke without warning, his cross words bouncing off the rounded walls. “Look, mate, can you just tell us when we’re getting out of this shithole?”

Gratitude surged through me, and I put my head down to hide it, pretending to concentrate on my progress through the water. I wondered if Gil had felt my agitation through the bond. I’d need to get a better handle on that, somehow.

“That would be a question for Rothilion,” I heard Laurie say. I looked up in time to see him nod at Peeks.

“Rothilion?” I echoed, wincing with sympathy. Jassin hadn’t even given his kid a *chance*.

Our guide didn’t look back, but his response floated to my ears. “Peeks was a nickname my brother gave me, because of how I peered around doorways before entering a room,” he said. “Well, my brother in mind and soul, if not in blood. We did everything together, Thuridan and I.”

“Thuridan?” I echoed, my interest perking. It wasn’t exactly a common name, and Peeks was from the Unseelie Court. He had to be talking about the same Thuridan that had publicly accused me of murdering Collith. I wasn’t sure what it was about him that made my instincts rattle. But my voice betrayed nothing as I added, “I’ve met him, I think. He returned to Court when he heard about…”

When he heard about Jassin, I’d been about to say. Although Peeks seemed to have positive feelings toward his father’s murder, it didn’t seem kind to remind him of it. The death of a parent was always significant, regardless of the circumstances that came before it.

Even so, I wasn’t about to let this opportunity pass me by. I’d been wanting to learn more about Thuridan for weeks, especially after I discovered how Lyari felt about him. My friend could certainly protect herself, but what was the harm in making sure Thuridan wasn’t a complete asshole?

I cleared my throat and ventured, “Your brother seems to have a history with my Right Hand. Do you still have a relationship with him? How did you end up here and he didn’t?”

Peeks paused where the tunnels formed a T, then veered to the left. He still didn’t turn or look back at me as he spoke. “The original plan was for both of us to defect to the Seelie Court,” he said eventually. “In those days, we never even imagined separating. We might as well have been twins, right down to our unfortunate size, although he was even smaller than me back then. Thuridan the Runt, our people called him. We were at each other’s side through every tutoring session, every holiday, every gathering. I was never jealous that my father loved Thuridan instead of me, because I found Jassin terrifying, anyway. So the two of us survived growing up in the Unseelie Court by depending on each other. Thuridan kept my father’s attention off me, and I used my ability to hide, creep, and peek to our advantage.

“But then everything changed.” Peeks paused suddenly, and I couldn’t tell if it was because he was considering our route or what he was about to say next was more difficult. He led us onward and continued in the same distant tone, “In the course of a single night, Thuridan seemed to become an entirely different person. He didn’t come to my family’s rooms in the morning, as he always did. He wouldn’t look at me during our coursework. I tried to ask him what was wrong, but he pretended to be ignorant of my meaning. From that day forward, he barely acknowledged me. He began spending his time with the bigger males, and then he went on to become a Guardian. Nuvian sent him to Australia to deal with some redcaps making a racket. My brother never came back; I heard later that he put in a request to be stationed there. I waited for him, but after several years, I finally followed through on our plan and sought a life free of my father. I chose not to reclaim the name Jassin gave me once I arrived here.”

He said this with a note of finality. *Understandable*, I thought with a wince of sympathy. I’d never been thrilled about getting saddled with “Fortuna,” but at least my parents hadn’t named me fucking Rothilion.

Confirming that he’d reached the end of his tale, Peeks remained silent this time. I mulled over what I had just learned. What I found most interesting was the fact that he spoke of his past so freely—normally, it was in a faerie’s nature to conceal and deceive.

I studied the back of the faerie's copper head as if it were as telling as a facial expression. Being the Unseelie Queen had also taught me how to notice the smaller things, the subtle ticks and giveaways. There was a hunch to Peeks's narrow shoulders, and his voice had been too casual during his telling. It still bothered him, the change that had overcome Thuridan and altered their friendship forever. I tucked the information away thoughtfully, wondering if Lyari knew about this part of her friend's history.

After that, the quiet returned in full force. None of us said anything in response to Peeks's sad story, maybe because he didn't seem to want one, or because we didn't know what to say.

Anxiety formed in my gut as I waited for Laurie to take advantage of the lull, to finish the conversation we'd started about my reasons for sparing Belanor. But he didn't. And as the seconds ticked past again, I sought a distraction from the tension. It wasn't difficult to find one; my mind went back to our destination. That was when I thought of yet another potential obstacle.

"Shit, what about Viessa?" I blurted. "We may have been allies during the coup, but I don't know where we stand now. If the Unseelie Court has caught wind of Belanor's interest in me, maybe she'll give us right back to him, in hopes of securing—"

"Stop talking," Peeks said. There was something in his voice that made me obey.

Gil let out what could only be described as a hiss. I glanced at him sharply, but all of the vampire's focus was riveted on the tunnel ahead, his eyes flaring with an animalistic brightness. His fangs were extended, and they pressed against his lower lip. The pearly surfaces of his teeth gleamed in the harsh glow of the lantern, still slightly blue from the blood of all the faeries he'd ripped into tonight.

"We're not alone down here," Gil said, answering my unspoken question. His gaze met mine for the briefest of instants. It was a conflicting blend of concern for me and… eagerness. An eagerness he couldn't hide and didn't even try to. A soft breath of unease chilled my heart, like someone sighing into a dark, wintry night.

Laurie, I noted, had drawn his sword again.

Seconds later, we reached an intersection of tunnels. Peeks, Laurie, and Gil stopped, all of them mute and alert. I didn't hear anything, and nothing

moved in the depths of the four tunnels around us. I kept turning, searching the dark as my heart beat in my ears. For several silent, breathless seconds, I still couldn't see what had the others standing so stiffly.

Then I did see them, and I wished I hadn't.

Eyes. Glowing eyes.

I must've made a sound of some kind, because in the next breath, that glowing swarm started coming closer. I lifted the sword and held it just as Adam had showed me during our last lesson—my dominant hand just below the hilt, my other on the pommel. I could hear his voice from that day, the memory crisp as autumn leaves against a blue sky. *Your rear hand delivers the force of the blow, while the front hand guides the blade.*

The three males around me had settled into defensive stances, as well. The lantern shone from the ground now, where Peeks must have put it in order to free his hands.

The creatures made no effort to hide their presence; I could hear their feet splashing through water, though where we stood was dry, thankfully. They emerged from the shadows like a scene in a horror movie. I even heard the high-pitched ring of panic as I took in the sight of their bowed backs and exaggerated front teeth. Before I could form a coherent thought, one of them moved forward, stepping past the invisible line the rest seemed to be trapped behind. As the figure moved into the light, and I got my first look at him, the sword in my hands suddenly felt like a toy. A needle.

It was the most massive man I'd ever seen.

No, not a man, I thought instantly. He was in a form halfway between a human-shaped male and a… rat. That had to be it. Where his face should've been was a long snout, complete with whiskers and a pink nose. Until that moment, I had always thought rat's noses were cute, but there was nothing cute about the creature sizing me up as if I were back on the auction block. If I had hackles, they would've been rising. I twisted my hands around the sword as though it were a baseball bat.

These things were either shapeshifters or wererats, I decided as my arms tensed, readying for a strike if the big one came any closer. I'd never heard of a wererat, but after everything I'd been through since meeting Collith, my mind was open to all sorts of possibilities.

It was also impossible to miss that the male in front of me was completely naked. The creature must've been wearing clothes at some point, because scraps of material still stretched across his barrel chest and around his thick waist. My gaze moved downward of its own volition—or so I told myself—and I just barely managed not to raise my eyebrows. But it was fitting, really, that the largest male I'd ever met was also in possession of the biggest cock. It hung there like a third limb, and I shuddered in pity for anyone who attempted to put that inside them.

Realizing that I was staring, my attention snapped back up to the male's clean-shaven, square-shaped face. Too late—he must've seen my horror, because his chest puffed and he gave me a smug grin, revealing teeth that were surprisingly white for someone living in the sewers. He might've been handsome, with those teeth and his shoulder-length curls, but the rat's nose and the smugness in his expression made him unappealing. I was about to roll my eyes when the creature said something in German, and more laughter floated out of the darkness behind him. Laurie and Gil shifted closer to me. I resisted the urge to look over my shoulder or peer into the other tunnels. How many were there? Were they surrounding us?

My answer came a few seconds later.

At their leader's beckoning, more wererats crawled into the light like nightmares, walking on their hands and the soles of their feet. Some of them had tails, long and lined with hair, which snapped in the air or curled around their bent bodies. There was no disparity between the amount of males and females, and several of them draped over the Rat King as if they had no bones. Still more plastered themselves against his legs. Every face turned toward us, all those eyes round and shining black or red.

The entire image looked like something out of a bizarre, dark painting.

From what I remembered, rats were not a mate-for-life kind of mammal. Wererats seemed to be no different, despite their divine ancestry.

"How can we help you, friend?" Laurie asked at last. His tone was pleasant and he'd lowered his sword, looking completely at ease, as if he often encountered creatures like this while wading through waste-filled tunnels.

"I am Luther," the enormous male answered in English, his accent thick, "and you are in my domain now."

Laurie wasn't fazed by the threat in those words. He inclined his head in an effortless courtly movement. "We apologize for the intrusion. I hadn't been aware this… dominion was claimed. We'll just be on our way, then."

All at once, the wererat lost interest in us, or maybe he'd just finished his evaluation. He made a dismissive gesture as he turned away, saying over his meaty shoulder, "You may leave. The female stays."

I frowned blankly before I realized who he was talking about. Rage smoldered in my stomach like hot coals.

"The female," I said flatly, making Luther turn back, "doesn't follow your orders. I'm going with my friends, and if you try to stop me, I'll make sure your death is slow and painful."

As I spoke, I flexed my arms again, drawing the wererat's attention back to the sword I held. He went still, and something about his silence emanated surprise. He stared at my face, and I stared back defiantly, my chin half-raised in the air. After another moment, Luther began to laugh. It was a deep sound, forming in the pit of his enormous stomach. His subjects tittered, as well, filling the cold air with echoes of their eerie giggling and cackles. Gil's expression was murderous, and I gritted my teeth to hold back a snarl of my own.

Then Luther raised his hand, and the sound immediately ceased. He scowled at me now, his moods as mercurial as the wind. "I am the Rat King. I do not argue with prisoners," he declared.

"Yeah, well, I don't argue with—" I didn't see the self-professed king make any sort of signal, so I wasn't ready when something moved behind us. Laurie made a sound I'd never heard come from his throat. I spun toward him, terrified of what I'd see. Our eyes met for an instant, just long enough for me to see the startled light within those silver depths. Then Laurie looked down, and it felt like time slowed as I followed his gaze.

A blade protruded from his stomach. It looked like the tip of a dagger or a knife. I knew I was in shock, because the specifics of the weapon weren't relevant. *It's okay,* I reminded myself. *He can heal from that. He can survive that.*

As if Laurie could hear the thought, his starry eyes fixed on mine again. Before I could move or speak, nine more blades were shoved into him from behind.

Frozen in horror, I watched as one of them went through his heart.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Everything that happened next occurred over four seconds. Seconds that my dim, shocked mind tracked with the amount of breaths I took.

During the first beat, the first breath, I felt something fall from my limp fingers. *The sword*, I thought.

Second breath. I heard the sword hit the ground with a clattering sound, but I didn't try to retrieve it—all my focus was riveted on Laurie. My lips had parted as if I were about to speak, but nothing came out.

Third breath. Before I could move or make a sound, all those knives in Laurie's body were yanked out. His entire body jerked and blood spurted from the fresh wounds, staining the concrete at our feet. That was when Laurie's fingers must've gone limp, because his beautiful sword joined mine on the ground. A line of blue streamed from the corner of the faerie's sensual mouth, and he stared at me with his eyebrows raised in an expression of faint surprise. I stared back, still frozen, feeling like I'd been stabbed alongside him.

The breath after that, Laurie was on his knees, water splashing around him as he landed. Peeks finally took action, darting to catch Laurie around his waist. Gil crouched beside me and lifted his fingers as if there were claws at the end of them, all of his focus on the Rat King.

When the others moved, it felt like time started moving at a normal pace again. I blinked, the haze around my thoughts clearing, and then I took in the picture that Laurie and Peeks made. In any other situation, the height discrepancy between them might've been comical. As it was, I could see that Peeks was using every bit of fae strength in his possession

to keep Laurie upright. He needed help. Why couldn't I budge? Why couldn't I go to him?

Collith. This was too much like what I'd felt the night I lost Collith.

Sensing Peeks's dilemma, somehow, Laurie tried to straighten. He immediately swayed, though, forcing Peeks to readjust his hold. I started to shout for a healer at the same instant Laurie managed to lift his head. The words stuck in my throat. We stared at each other again, and his beautiful eyes had an empty sheen that I'd glimpsed in others' gazes before him. Fred's. Collith's.

It was a look of death.

When I saw that, I felt a familiar sensation inside my body, somewhere deep, probably where my heart and soul met. Like a fissure running through the earth or a cresting wave that was the size of a small city. Gil said my name, his voice a distant sound.

Power exploded from my being.

I threw my arms out, following an instinct that surged so strongly it was as if it came from every Nightmare that had lived before me. The wererats were as helpless as children against my fury. I claimed their phobias without any resistance or challenges, and I was almost disappointed. Almost. The addiction had already rushed back, though, the heady thrill that had sent me to Cyrus in the first place. I felt omniscient. Limitless. Like a god. If I were thinking normally, I might have been worried, especially considering I was only using their smallest fears against them. The biggest ones, the threads woven through the fabric of their souls, those I left alone.

My eyes tingled, and I glanced down as I strode deeper into the tunnel. The water was so dim that I could only make out the shape of my face and see the bright, bright red of my irises, glowing as if my insides were made of fire instead of flesh. The wererats' terror was all around my body, filling it, rushing through it like a river of horrors. The rush was so potent that I nearly closed my eyes to enjoy it. I kept them open, though, so I could watch my—what had Gil called them?

Morsels. That was it. I wanted to watch the morsels suffer. I wouldn't kill them, no, I would spare them so they could spread my message. The message that *this* was what happened when someone I cared about was harmed.

The only one I left untouched was the Rat King.

Remembering myself, I walked back the way I'd come and returned to my companions. If either of them found the change in me strange or frightening, neither male showed it. Luther, however, clearly hadn't put together that I was causing the pandemonium; his shrewd gaze darted around, evaluating Peeks, assessing Gil. The rest of the wererats moaned and shrieked, still reacting to my presence in their skulls. Some cowered and trembled. Others were already trying to run or fight from the things I made them see. Animals, places, people. A brave few, the strong-minded, were trying to get to me in spite of their visions.

Ignoring them, as if they were as insignificant as shadows, I fixed my attention to Laurie. At some point, he had tipped backward, and his head was now propped against the wall. Thankfully, the position he was in kept half of his body out of the water. Peeks huddled beside him, thrusting his sword at one of the wererats in a clear threat. I didn't tell him it was unnecessary—I was in control now, and none of these creatures were strong enough to break free of my influence—because I knew better than anyone the comfort of holding a weapon during moments of fear.

Whatever had caused my hesitation before was gone now, and I finally knelt at Laurie's side, pressing my hands on the wound where his heart was. His blood was wet and warm against my skin. The feel of it made something inside me twist, but I didn't flinch. Laurie was all that mattered now. His eyes were squeezed shut, his face twisted in a grimace. His beautiful skin, normally an alluring combination of silver and gold, somehow, if the light hit it just right, was the color of chalk.

"Laurie?" I said, my calm voice at odds with the chaos of the rats. "Laurie, can you heal from this?"

He didn't answer.

The fissure within me opened wider. I arched my head back to look up at a wererat trembling nearby. She was small but muscled, and her brown hair was cut short around her ears. In certain ways, she reminded me of Cora, the young werewolf alpha I'd befriended. I noted this wererat wore a thick coat and tight jeans, the clothes surprisingly clean and well-made, despite our surroundings. Maybe there was more to these creatures than it seemed.

But that wasn't important right now. This wererat was the one who'd put a knife through Laurie's heart.

I could see the fear in her head, hear her wild string of thoughts. The words were a blend of German and Enochian that I only understood because I'd become part of her. *Fuck, fuck, landed the killing blow, she's going to blame me, holy shit, who is this bitch, fuck—*

"The knife," I said, making my voice sound vast and ancient in her mind. "Was it dipped in holy water? Was there a spell on it?"

Eyes wide with terror, she shook her head so hard that strands of her hair whipped across her forehead and stuck there. I got the feeling that if the female tried to respond out loud, the only sound to come from her throat would've been a high, incomprehensible squeak.

That was when Luther must've figured out that I was responsible for everything happening, because he started toward me with a thunderous expression, his huge fists clenched at his sides. I knew a single blow from one of those would make me see stars. I turned and, using the movement of my body to summon it, directed my power at him as if it were a physical thing. It was exactly how I'd turned toward Savannah and ended up killing Collith instead.

But this time, I saw the danger. This time, I didn't let the fury spread to every part of my mind. At the last second, I pulled my power back, making it painful instead of lethal. I was mildly surprised when Luther fought back and managed to keep me out. I didn't push harder; it wasn't my goal to get past his defenses. Only to distract him while I attended to Laurie.

With the Rat King preoccupied, I looked at my friend's face again, then at his injuries—despite the wererat's claim about her knife, those gaps in his flesh didn't seem to be closing. The damage must've been substantial to immobilize him like this. I pushed down harder on the spot over his heart, wishing for the first time that I'd been born as a healer instead of a Nightmare.

The pressure made Laurie's eyes crack open, and they were bright with pain. The ends of his hair trailed through the water as he tried to move his head. His throat worked. Suddenly I had an awful suspicion that he was trying to say goodbye.

"Shut up. Shut up, right now. You're not going to die on me. I won't allow it," I told him, tight-lipped with fury. Resolve hardened inside me, more solid than any rock or fist. I raised my gaze back to the Rat King of Munich and relented in my battering against his mind. He recovered so quickly that I might've admired him under different circumstances. In an

instant, Luther's eyes focused on me, and they were black with wrath. My own voice brimmed with violence as I told him, "Summon your best healer, right now, or I kill you all where you stand."

"No," he said. He didn't even hesitate. I wondered what his people would think of his callous regard for their lives. Would this king be so ruthless if he knew they could hear him?

Tilting my head, I gave the Rat King another long, assessing look. He glared back, his lip curled with disdain. It was the disdain that triggered my own ruthlessness. This arrogant male was about to find out just who he'd fucked with. He must've had some idea, since he hadn't taken a single step closer to me, but he was still a fool if he thought he would be walking away tonight. The howling rage within my body abated, replaced by solid ice. I felt my lips curve in a soft, sympathetic smile.

"Luther, dear, I'm afraid I need to call your bluff," I said gently.

He frowned, but I didn't wait for his response. With a single thought, I cut the illusions around me short. Still leaning over Laurie, I turned my head to watch the rats blink, some of them already straightening. Those were the ones quicker to realize what had happened.

The rest weren't far behind, though. Soon every creature within sight was staring at me and the Rat King. "I require a healer for my friend," I informed them. "I have presented your king with a choice. Acquiesced to my request, or die. Every last one of you, including Luther."

Once I finished speaking, no one moved or spoke. I looked at the wererats standing closest to where me, Laurie, Peeks, and Gil were clustered. Sensing their fear, seeing it in their faces, I hesitated. It was more than fear for their own lives. They *cared* about this chauvinistic male who'd just tried to take me against my will. They would surrender to save him. I didn't need to be a Nightmare to know it—the truth was in those black, beady eyes. What had Luther done to inspire such loyalty? What if I was about to add more innocent blood to my stained hands?

I decided to find out for myself.

I knew I probably didn't need to touch the Rat King to wield the full extent of my abilities—I'd just used them on every wererat around us, none of which I had experienced any physical contact with—but other than the confrontation with Belanor, I hadn't explored my limits since becoming a Nightmare again. Maybe a small part of me was afraid of my power when it reached those heights. Afraid that the rush, the sense of

utter invincibility, would gradually transform me into the creature Gwyn predicted I'd become.

So I removed my hands from Laurie's chest, trying not to think about how cold he'd become, and darted toward the Rat King.

Though it was probably the last thing he expected, Luther reacted immediately and tried to grab me. But I'd been trained by a vampire; I evaded his grasp by dropping to the ground and sliding over the dirt-covered concrete alongside him, scraping the skin off my palm as I used it for balance. As I flew past, I reached up and skimmed my fingers along the length of Luther's arm. I popped up behind the wererat at the same moment he spun, drawing his fist back to hit me.

"Too late," I crooned. He was mine.

Luther's psyche was more well-guarded than I thought it would be, but this was no impenetrable wall like the ones around Collith and Laurie's. I saw the Rat King's eyes widen just before I reinvaded his mind, ramming through the clutter and piles that formed his inner self.

In the physical world, I felt him stiffen. But if Luther fought me again, I didn't even notice. The wererat wouldn't move now—the morsels never did, once they felt my claws buried in their brains. I knew his companions wouldn't risk attacking me, either.

I'd learned much from that single, brief touch, the most important being Luther had no phobias, just as it had been with Gwyn of the Wild Hunt. It made sense, really. When you were a massive shapeshifter with a supernatural healing ability, it stood to reason that you'd let go of those small fears most people had. I'd expected this, but I had allowed myself to hope I wouldn't have to resort to what came next. To using my power in a way that always pushed me toward the edge of something.

Seeing no hope for it, I went right up to that edge.

I began rifling through the Rat King's head like someone at a garage sale. I soon learned that he was more intelligent than I'd realized. His thoughts and memories were chaotic, but I could sense the essence of him, who he was, and it was obvious Luther Knopf hadn't obtained his throne through sheer brutality and strength—he'd used cunning, too. It was a story I would've liked to know, but there was no time for that. I kept going.

It didn't take long to find the memory I needed; terror emanated from it like a light or a beacon. Following Luther's example, I didn't hesitate.

In an instant, I discovered the Rat King was afraid of the sky.

He'd spent decades avoiding wide, open spaces. The wererat had been alive during World War II, and when bombs fell on Berlin, he'd watched his mother die. I winced and hurriedly retreated from the memory of her broken body, trapped beneath a pile of debris. After that, young Luther had gone into the ground, and he'd barely left it since.

I wasn't so cruel as to make him relive those terrible moments again, but I still had a point to make.

In the space of a blink, the Rat King and I both stood on the street where it happened. Stars shone above our heads. Structures loomed on either side—they looked residential, but they weren't shaped like the houses I was familiar with—and the night was quiet.

"What is this? Where are we?" Luther hissed, his eyes darting around us. His fangs were elongated and his face slightly misshapen. The rat was coming out as a response to his fear. I could taste it on the air, sharp and tangy, like an underripe orange.

"We're in your mind," I told the Rat King. He said something in German, his tone sharp. Normally I didn't speak German, but we were in his head, his memory, and I understood the words easily this time. *I am going to skin you alive*, he'd said. I gave Luther a bored look. "You can try. I'll have you blubbering like a baby before you can so much as touch me."

"What do you want?" he asked, in English this time. There was a dangerous gleam in his eye that promised vengeance whenever the opportunity arose, and it was clear I'd added yet another enemy to the ever-growing list of names in my head.

I tilted my head as I had seen Laurie do a hundred times, but there was nothing pleasant in my voice as I said, "I want to leave these tunnels with my friends tonight, alive and completely unharmed. Which means you'll have to fetch that healer. I should warn you, though, if Laurie dies I won't have anything to lose, and you don't want to see me like that."

Before Luther could respond, I smiled again, allowing him to glimpse the ferocity I'd let out like a lion from a cage. It was the part of me that had killed everyone in the black market and made ancient faeries cringe away in fear. The part of me Gwyn had liked. The part of me Dracula had wanted for his elite force of soldiers.

The part of me that I was fucking terrified of.

I didn’t let any of this show on my face, of course—Luther only saw the mask of the Unseelie Queen. He stood there, a hulking shape against the dark horizon, his expression mutinous. When it became evident that he didn’t intend to speak, I lifted my hand and flicked two fingers. The sound of planes immediately sounded in the distance. It was dramatic, maybe, but very effective; I could already taste Luther’s terror on my tongue. The flavor reminded me of smoke. I hadn’t intended to go this far, and the fact that I was willing to give up a piece of my soul to save Laurie was something I would need to think about later.

For now, my only focus was on breaking the Rat King of Munich.

“Your choice is simple, and the clock is ticking,” I said over the ominous hum. Screams began to pierce the night, as well. Beads of sweat formed on Luther’s forehead, visible even in the dimness. I raised my voice to continue, “I will spare your life if you save Laurie’s and allow us to go free! What is your answer? Tick tock, Your Majesty.”

The wererat still didn’t respond—his eyes were on the sky. His heart was beating so rapidly that I could see it in his throat, a feathery movement that made me think of a rodent scrabbling for cover. When he still said nothing, I quirked a brow, and the first bomb fell. It decimated a building farther down the street and it felt like the entire city quaked.

Luther paled. “Fine. Yes. I agree to your terms. Now get us out of here, you wench.”

My eyes narrowed, and I could almost hear Collith’s weary sigh as I flexed my power. In the next moment, the bombs were falling all around us, making the ground explode in violent bursts of cobblestone and dirt. The whine of the airplanes was so loud that it nearly drowned out the sound of Luther bellowing for his mother, and he whirled to run.

Satisfied, I ended the illusion and retracted from Luther’s mind.

Back in the rank sewer tunnel, the silence around us was so profound that it seemed like no one was breathing. As if they hadn’t dared to for the entire time he’d been in my grasp.

Once again displaying his exceptional ability to adapt, Luther wasted no time. Turning his back on us, the Rat King directed his attention to a female standing in the mouth of another tunnel. He released a string of deep, terse German. The female listened to him speak, and her eyes widened with every word that came out of Luther’s mouth. When he was finished, she responded instantly, her voice full of disbelief. Whatever she

saw in the king's face made the other wererat pale. She quickly bowed and backed away.

After that, there was nothing else to do but wait. I returned to my companions, tense and jittery with power. I wanted to use it again. And again. And again.

My gaze flitted past Gil, then darted back to him. He gave me a knowing look, a look that said he felt the same urges. With half his face covered in blood, he was the picture of savagery. I could still feel that telltale tingle in my eyes. *What a twisted pair we make,* I thought.

Even more twisted was how grateful I was that I wasn't alone in this unique, dark struggle.

Mercifully, the healer didn't take long. Within minutes, a very pregnant wererat emerged from the mass of faces, eyes, and tails. She wore a black dress that looked like something I might find at a boutique store, with charming frills along the sleeves and chest. Her brown hair was gathered in a thick braid, and her round, pale face radiated a calm that I could only dream of feeling. She spotted Laurie straightaway and waddled over to him, paying no heed to the dirty water. Her dark skirt trailed through it like a macabre wedding train.

The sound of my voice made her pause. "If you try to double cross me, or harm him in any way, I won't choose mercy," I said.

I didn't let myself glance down at her swollen belly as I made the threat, but guilt still pricked my heart like a needle. Why did it feel as though I were arguing with Collith instead of scaring a wererat witless?

If the healer found the phrasing of my warning strange, she didn't dare express it. She simply bobbed her head and refocused on Laurie, putting her delicate hands on the wound over his heart just as I had. With that, she began her work.

There was nothing whimsical or ethereal about healing. Any Fallen creature who possessed the ability to magically repair people's bodies seemed to share that single similarity—healing was painful, bloody, and loud. It also came at a cost, whether that was aging the bearer or draining their energy to dangerously low levels. It was why I would never be able to repay Zara for all she'd done.

After a few minutes, the healer's body began to shake.

"You've given enough," I said coolly, keeping any concern I felt out of my expression. Her breathing was ragged as she leaned back, taking her

palms off Laurie. There were still holes in his shirt, the edges stained with blue, but the flesh beneath had knitted together and become smooth once more. When I saw that, breathing suddenly became easier, making me realize that I hadn't been until that moment.

Laurie still hadn't opened his eyes. I could feel everyone in the tunnel watching me. Ignoring them, I knelt in the muck and took my friend's hand in both of mine. His skin was usually warm, and a jolt of fear went through me when I felt how cold it was now. "Time to come back," I murmured, hoping my voice would reach him.

When Laurie didn't stir, I swallowed a curse. We didn't have time for him to regain consciousness naturally, not when we were surrounded by hostile Fallen in a dank tunnel, with even more Fallen searching for us aboveground. Without conferring with the others, I closed my eyes and gently eased into the Seelie Prince's psyche again. I had no expectations that I would be able to penetrate it—Laurie's mind was a fortress, just as Collith's usually was, which was why my abilities rarely worked on them—but apparently a near-death experience had lowered his guard.

I meant to communicate with him, as I had when we'd been on that imaginary mountaintop. I began to say his name, mind to mind. Then memory glimmered, like a light at the corner of my eye, and I realized that Laurie was inside it. He must've retreated there while the healer repaired his broken body.

What sort of memory comforted a creature like Laurelis Dondarte in his darkest moments?

My curiosity was too strong. Knowing time was not on our side, I slipped into Laurie's past and told myself I would only stay for a few seconds. Long enough to take a look around and urge him back to consciousness.

The moment I entered the memory, I saw everything through its owner's eyes. Laurie's elegant hand grasped a familiar doorknob, and with a sense of anticipation, he twisted it. The door opened to reveal his rooms at the palace.

He immediately turned to the left, heading for the room with the piano and the chairs. Collith raised his head, a welcoming smile already spreading across his face. It was the version of him I'd seen in that picture, unscarred and alight with hope. Innocence. I darted a glance toward the wall, where I'd seen it hanging before, but of course it wasn't there yet. I

refocused on Collith, and part of me almost wished I could warn him of all the terrible things that were coming.

The other part of me was glad for the suffering he'd soon endure.

"I have a gift for you," Laurie said by way of greeting. He kept his voice pitched low to avoid waking Naevys, who slept in one of the other rooms. His arm was tucked behind him as he crossed the room, his footsteps making hollow sounds against the tiled floor. In spite of my limited vantage point, I could see that Laurie wore the clothing of a faerie, down to his knee-high boots. The buttons on his gold brocade vest gleamed in sunlight.

Collith sighed and set his book down on a side table. That stubborn lock of hair fell into his eye, and the sight of it made my heart ache. "A gift?" he repeated. "You've welcomed us into your home, Laurelis. I know the toll it must take on your power to keep our faces hidden while we're outside these rooms. That's gift enough."

"True," Laurie acknowledged, bringing his arm into the open. He waggled his eyebrows suggestively. "So if you'd like some ideas on how to express your gratitude, I have a few."

Collith was on the verge of responding when his gaze dropped to the object the Seelie King held. Laurie did the same, and I recognized it instantly. The gilt edges, the long handle. It was the same mirror Collith had left on my doorstep, months ago, when we were still strangers and he'd been orchestrating my path to the throne.

Tilting his head, Collith grasped the handle and held it up. "It's beautiful, but why would—"

His words cut short, and Laurie waited patiently. After a moment, Collith lowered the mirror to reveal the wide grin he wore. The sight was so surprising I couldn't help but stare; I'd never seen him smile like that, not once in all the time I'd known him. The feeling that curled around my heart was undefinable, but I knew it was something between jealousy and sorrow. Jealousy that I hadn't inspired such a smile, and sorrow for how far he had fallen from this boy in front of me.

"…another one of your tricks, Laurelis?" Collith was asking. With effort, I managed to refocus on the scene unfolding before me. Collith glanced at the mirror again and added, "Why does this gift only show me your face?"

At this, Laurie gave him a look that could only be described as tender. I was only confused for a second or two, and then I remembered what Laurie once told me about that mirror.

It was a witch's spell. She made it so the glass showed you whoever you loved most.

In the next moment, I finally understood why I could see this memory—there was the faintest tang of fear in the air. Like me, Laurie was afraid of vulnerability. He worried about the weakness it would bring and the price he would pay. Because he'd learned that everything came with a price. Especially love.

"Are you all right?" Collith asked.

Laurie looked back at him, which meant I looked back at him, too. The prince we both loved. As Laurie stared in those hazel eyes, now bright with concern, he recognized that it was too late. He'd fallen in love with this faerie, and nothing short of a spell could undo it. And perhaps not even that.

You and me both, I thought with a pang.

I'd barely finished forming the words in my mind when I felt Laurie's consciousness, his presence. The air was thick with awareness—he'd heard me. My pulse quickened at the realization.

Before I could attempt to reach him again, I was thrown out of Laurie's head. It happened so quickly, so efficiently that it didn't cause me any pain, and in an instant we were back in the sewers. I adjusted just as fast as the Rat King had. I dropped to my knees beside Laurie's prone form, ignoring the water already seeping through the fabric of my gown. I also disregarded the audience surrounding us on every side, watching with their glowing eyes.

"Laurie?" I said urgently, resting my hand on his newly-healed chest. "Laurie, if you're awake, please say something."

A grimace crossed his face. Without opening his eyes Laurie said, "Don't you know your fairy tales, woman? You're supposed to wake the prince with a kiss."

"You know what? I think I liked you better when you were dying." I smiled to soften the words.

A second later, Laurie opened his eyes. His beautiful silver eyes, which caught a weak ray of light coming from above, making them glimmer like the surface of a lake doused in moonlight. They found me instantly, and

my stomach fluttered as a soft smile curved his lips. Moving slowly, Laurie raised his hand and touched my cheek with the tip of his finger. To catch a tear, I discovered as he lowered it again. The water rested on his skin like a tiny diamond.

“I thought we’d lost you,” I whispered, trying to explain the tears away.

Luther made a sound deep in his throat that conveyed his impatience. Startled, my gaze flicked back to him. “Giselle. Please show our… guests to the surface,” he said.

The wererat Luther had barked at earlier stepped forward, her posture screaming reluctance. Laurie’s expression sharpened, and he got to his feet. The healing may have closed his wounds, but it hadn’t restored him to full strength, because he stumbled instantly. I hurried to catch him, and Peeks and Gil shifted to form a wall behind us. Laurie grunted and put his arm around my shoulders, the only outward sign he gave of how much the injuries had weakened him.

All at once, the creatures in the tunnels scattered, their whispers and hisses bouncing off the bricks. As the Rat King turned to do the same, he and I exchanged one final, lingering look. His eyes shone with hatred. I’d humiliated him, bested him, and the fact that I was female made that fact all the more painful for him. I was tempted to flash a taunting, catty smile, but I’d rubbed the king’s face in my power enough for one night. After another moment, I adjusted my hold on Laurie and turned my back on Luther Knopf.

Somehow, I suspected this wasn’t the last time we’d see each other. And the next time we met, I’d need to be ready.

The four of us walked away, our path once again lit by Peeks’s lantern, which had miraculously survived the past few minutes. Though I half-expected our newfound freedom to be a trick, no one tried to stop us. We had only gone a few steps when I remembered the sword that I’d dropped at the start of everything. Laurie’s sword had been lost, too. But both of my hands were occupied, and I wasn’t in the mood to put one of them in the filthy water in search of our lost blades. Mourning the loss of such a lovely weapon, I tamped down the regret and pressed on.

Minutes ticked by. The quiet returned in full force, broken only by passing cars and our footsteps. It once again seemed as if we were completely alone in these tunnels. I knew better now. I scanned every

shadow and movement, wary that Luther would still try to double cross us. Eventually, Laurie's weight eased off me, and his gait became smoother. But he still didn't pull away, and neither did I. His warmth felt like a gentle campfire against my chilled, damp skin and his solidness was a constant reminder that he hadn't died in this horrible place. *I saved him. I saved him.* I held Laurie tighter, pretending not to notice his sideways glance, and chanted the thought over and over until I believed it.

At long last, Giselle halted. She made a sharp gesture, and I followed it to the other end of the tunnel. Just like the ladder we'd climbed down to get into this place, a second ladder awaited. At least this one was on dry ground. I turned to thank Giselle, but she'd already left, of course. I caught a glimpse of her tail, snapping with obvious irritation as the darkness swallowed her whole.

"Let's go before they change their minds." Gil started toward the ladder.

I was about to follow suit when Peeks's voice stopped me. "I'm afraid this is where we part ways," he said.

Gil didn't bother pausing or saying his goodbyes—he was too desperate to escape the smell assailing his vampiric senses. I heard the sewer grate scraping against the road as he pushed it out of his way.

In the meantime, I turned to face Peeks. Because we were holding each other, Laurie turned, too. Without a word, the smaller faerie held out the beautiful sword that Tabitha had dropped from her claws. I'd thought it was lost forever. Clever Peeks, who crept so quietly and peered around corners. He must've searched for it while everyone else had been watching me.

Finally dropping his arm from my shoulders, Laurie stepped forward and accepted his sword. He'd already regained some of his strength, and he held it up without difficulty. He studied the intricate blade, and I studied him, admiring his lithe profile. Unaware of my scrutiny, Laurie refocused on Peeks and said, "I owe you a debt, Peeks of bloodline Sarwraek. You have served me well tonight. I won't soon forget that."

Peeks dipped into a graceful bow, his copper hair gleaming from the light of his lantern. "You will always be my king, Your Majesty. Throne or no throne."

His words reminded me of Lyari. They couldn't be more different, and yet, their hearts were the same. Bruised. Brave. Loyal.

“Come with us,” I said impulsively.

Peeks looked at me. For the first time since meeting him, he smiled. It was faint, barely more than a slight tightening at the corners of his mouth, but it was a smile. “I appreciate the kind offer, but I have a family here. I am content,” he replied.

Despite all he’d done to help me, I realized I knew little about him and his life at the Seelie Court. I did know what mattered, at least—that he was nothing like his father. “If you ever come to Colorado, you’ll always have a place to stay,” I told him.

He didn’t respond this time, and it felt like we’d said everything there was to say. I started to head for the ladder, realizing that I’d left a newborn vampire alone on the street. A street where a human could walk past at any moment.

“Thank you for killing my father,” Peeks said. My gaze flew to his, startled, and Peeks smiled again. This one was slightly crooked, a little sad, and somehow made him look more like Jassin than ever before.

I wasn’t sure how to answer. No one had thanked me for murdering their parent, and saying *you’re welcome* didn’t seem appropriate. Slowly I said, “You know, I used to think there was nothing good about him, but now I think I was wrong. There was one good thing.”

Peeks rewarded me with yet another smile, and then he was gone, moving just as silently as Giselle had. The creak of the lantern handle faded with him.

“Thank God,” Laurie muttered. He took hold of my arm and propelled me the rest of the way down the tunnel. “I was worried you were about to pick up another stray.”

“It’s probably for the best, considering I’m pretty busy with the ones I already have.” I shot him a pointed glance and pulled free.

Laurie sniffed. “I am not a *stray*, you petty creature. I am magnificent.”

We reached the bottom of the ladder, and I faced Laurie to give him one of my usual comebacks. The words faded on my tongue as he raised a hand and, with the barest of touches, brushed a strand of hair out of my face. I caught myself staring at him again, drawn like the moon to the sun. And just like the moon and the sun, the bond between us felt impossible.

As we stood there, I remembered what I’d heard Laurie say to Collith, that night I had eavesdropped on them in the woods. His soft voice

sounded through my memory. *This… thing with Fortuna snuck up on me*.

It had snuck up on me, too. I couldn't pretend otherwise after what happened tonight. But that sort of relationship with Laurie wouldn't lead to a happy ending, and I didn't need a Telling or a time-traveling faerie to tell me that.

Gil's voice drifted through the stillness, coming from above. "I may be immortal now, but I swear I can still feel myself getting older."

"I'll probably behead that vampire before the night is through," Laurie informed me.

Hiding my relief, I forced myself to turn away and grasp the bars of the ladder as if I weren't affected by him. I felt Laurie's attention on me as I began the climb upward. The train of my heavy gown lifted out of the water with a wet sound. I cringed and kept going, toward the moon, toward fresh air. Away from the Seelie Prince and everything he made me feel.

Because, just as Laurie had on the day he gave Collith that bespelled mirror, I knew there would be a price. Mercy Wardwell had foretold it, as well. The three of us had already paid so much for our choices and mistakes.

And I wasn't sure any of us would survive another payout.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I emerged into the streets of Munich weary, injured, and covered in shit.

Being able to see the sky was comforting, and the fresh air even more so. The moment I was clear of the hole we'd come out of, I stopped and inhaled several times. My damp clothes felt like a layer of ice against my skin, but I was so glad to be back aboveground that I welcomed it. Wind stirred the sweaty strands of hair clinging to my neck and cheeks. Still taking deep, greedy breaths, I did a swift scan of the street.

We appeared to be in a residential neighborhood. To my relief, there were no people within sight. Cars lined the curb, empty and dark. Even the streetlights seemed subdued. It must've been that time of night after everyone had gone to bed, but still too early for the bakers to emerge.

As Laurie materialized beside me, I found myself reluctant to move. From the edge of my vision I saw his fingers made quick work of the buttons on his coat, hiding the torn and stained shirt beneath. The blood could have just as easily been hidden by a glamour, or his abilities, and I'd spent enough time with Laurie to know that he was conserving whatever power he had left.

Which meant he was nervous how things would go at the Unseelie Court, too.

At the same moment Gil appeared on my other side, Laurie's phone trilled into the stillness. My pulse leaped at the sound—was it news on Finn? He pulled it from his pocket in a smooth, practiced movement and put it to his pointed ear without bothering to glance at the screen.

A low voice spoke on the other end, the words too muffled for me to hear. *I bet Gil can hear everything, though*, I thought. My gaze flicked over to the vampire to gauge his expression, but he wasn't paying attention to either of us. His head was turned toward one of the houses and he stood alarmingly still again. I wondered if he could smell or hear the humans inside.

Without thinking, I reached for Gil with both my hand and my mind. The bond brightened like a spark and I felt its heat, comparable to the heat of Gil's feverish skin. For a disorienting instant, it felt like I was staring at my own face, and I saw that Tabitha's carefully-applied makeup *really* hadn't fared well in the sewers. *Not important right now, Fortuna*.

"Hey," I said, blinking to set the world right again. Gil's eyes met mine. He stared at me for a beat, then two. After another moment, the frantic light in them dimmed.

I'd just let out a breath of relief when Laurie's call ended. He moved so quickly that his phone seemed to vanish mid-air, and he turned back to us. I dropped my hand from Gil's arm. "That was Lensa," the faerie prince said briskly. "She and the werewolf got out. I told her to bring him to Emma Miller instead of where we're bound."

The fact that he used her name showed Laurie's regard for the old woman. I suppressed a smile, and calm spread through me like the heat of a campfire. *Finn is safe.* Out loud I said, "Good call. Until I know how we'll be received, I don't want to put him in any more danger. Where is the closest Door, by the way?"

Whatever awaited us at the Unseelie Court, I wanted to get it over with. Not only was my body caked with blood and refuse, but I'd used my powers a lot tonight. The high was over now and I felt like a battery in its final moments.

"It's not far," Laurie said, inclining his head to indicate we should leave.

I couldn't even summon the energy to be annoyed at this nonanswer, but I was still considering pressing him when Laurie's phone rang again. This time he did look at the screen before putting it to his ear. He quickened his stride to put some distance between us, crooking his fingers as if to say, *Keep moving.* As we obeyed, his voice floated back to us in pieces. It was already a longer call than the last. Gil and I walked next to each other, neither of us saying a word for several blocks. I wasn't trying

to eavesdrop on Laurie, but I wasn't sure what to say. This seemed to keep happening to me. Suddenly I wished I was more like Emma, or Ariel, or Gretchen, who never seemed to be at a loss for words.

"You use your emotions," Gil said abruptly, solving the problem for both of us.

I glanced at him, frowning. "Excuse me?"

"When you're using your abilities," he clarified, his bleached hair glinting when we passed beneath a working streetlight. "I was there when you went head-to-head with the Rat King, remember? I got to observe the legendary Fortuna Sworn in all her glory. You're powerful, no denying it—I've never seen a Nightmare's eyes turn red like that—but if you depend too much on rage or pain, it'll make things harder to control."

"What do *you* use, then?" I asked without thinking. It was a personal question, and I was trying not to ask Gil those. Now that I had access to his every thought and feeling, it was the least I could do to let him volunteer that information.

But the vampire didn't seem bothered by my prying. His gaze continued darting around the street, and I couldn't discern if he was looking for threats, as Lyari always was, or if he was overwhelmed by his heightened senses. "It's like a muscle," he answered. "You can use your arm without adrenaline, right? Same concept applies for a Nightmare. You just need to work it."

I took a large step to avoid a frozen puddle. "Practice more? That's your big advice?"

"Do what you want. But next time you get dumped and end up killing the poor fellow, don't come crying to me."

"As if anyone would dump me," I muttered.

Up ahead, Laurie made a sound suspiciously like laughter. He'd finished his phone call and now stood waiting for us. Once we were within earshot he said, gesturing at a shop beside us, "Here we are."

Gil and I turned in unison, and I felt my eyebrows go up at the sight of the mannequin. She stood in a window, and the edges of the glass were lit up with red neon lights. She wore a leather contraption that crisscrossed over her nipples and disappeared between her legs. The Door we'd use to reach the Unseelie Court was, fittingly, the entrance to a sex toy shop.

Or the back entrance, I corrected silently when Laurie led us down a surprisingly clean alley, then stopped at the bottom of some steps. He

waited until we'd caught up before moving on.

Picturing the Court of Shadows, I ascended the stairs and braced myself as I drew closer to the Door. There was no need to open it, or so much as touch the knob—it could be locked, for all that mattered. The magic itself was in the frame. The outline. The intent. We were beginning to understand each other, magic and I. Since performing the spell on Gil, I'd developed a fascination for it.

A craving.

"Think of the Unseelie Court when you step through," I told the vampire behind me, realizing that he had probably never used a Door before. "You don't need to know what a place looks like. You just need to express your desire to get there."

"Since when did you become an expert on interdimensional travel?" Laurie asked the moment I stepped into the dirt passageway.

I was surprised he'd heard me, and I coughed to hide my reaction. I didn't know how to answer, or maybe I just didn't want to. But I needed to say *something*; Laurie was too smart for his own good, and any sign of hesitation would pique his interest more. "Uh…" I started.

Luck was on my side, because Gil appeared a moment later. Light from distant torches flickered over his angular face. The vampire looked around us instantly, his nostrils flaring. Within seconds, fear came off him in waves. He could sense them—the fae. *Don't worry, I've been there,* I wanted to say. It had only been earlier this year I entered the Unseelie Court for the first time, too. It was thanks to *that* visit I'd bear the marks of a cat o' nine tails for the rest of my life.

I realized Gil might not find this comforting, so I tried a reassuring smile instead. He gave me a look that said I hadn't succeeded. His brown eyes were still dilated, I noted with a pang of worry. We *really* needed to get him to Adam.

Laurie had already started down the tunnel, and as soon I realized this, I jolted into motion. It was too narrow for all three of us, but Gil filled the space at my side again. For his sake, I forced my own dread into a dark, secret place he couldn't reach from the bond. For a few minutes, I focused solely on Laurie, who walked with an urgency he hadn't shown before.

Collith is here. The thought came from nowhere, and I almost stumbled. But it was true—far, far below our feet, the faerie king Laurie and I had both loved and been betrayed by sat in a dungeon. Considering

Collith had the ability to sift, the cell was either bespelled or they'd put him in chains drenched with holy water. This was the Unseelie Court, so my bet was on the latter.

"What happens now?" Gil asked, keeping his voice low. There was something about this place that instinctively made you want to whisper. To avoid detection of the creatures lurking in the dark.

Pushing Collith's face out of my head, I cleared my throat and spoke at a normal volume. "Word will reach Viessa in a minute or two. She'll either meet us in the tunnels or order her Guardians to escort us to the throne room. It all depends on how she decides to play it."

"Play what?"

"The game." I said this with a rueful smile, thinking of a time when I hadn't been quite so good at it. Something in Gil's expression made my smile diminish. "What's wrong?"

"You mean, besides that we're surrounded by vicious, incredibly powerful faeries? I'm just… coming to terms with it. The fact that this is my new reality. A couple days ago, I was sitting on my stool at the stop, tattooing a skull on some guy's shoulder." There was a wistful twist to his lips as Gil refocused on me. His eyes were clearer now, and when I saw that, some of the pressure in my chest eased. *Talking about his old life helps*, I thought. I remembered a beat too late that Gil might be able to hear it. Would he see my fear as mistrust? What if discovering my doubts fed his own, and he lost control because of it?

Fortunately, Gil was so preoccupied with his own thoughts that he didn't hear mine. I felt him misinterpret my silence as awkwardness, probably because I'd already displayed it earlier. The vampire shrugged and added, "It makes me wonder if I was wrong about Him, after all, and maybe He does take an interest in us. Manipulate us. Because I refuse to believe my luck is *this* shitty."

My nose wrinkled. "You really think God instrumented it so we'd meet the Rat King?"

For a moment, I thought I saw a glimmer of Gil's crooked smile. "Yeah, you're right. Probably not," he admitted.

I was about to laugh when his expression shifted again, this time to one of concentration. I followed Gil's gaze down the tunnel and instantly spotted the figures that he must've sensed—there were three of them. Torches flickered on both sides of the tunnel and shone upon their

unnerving beauty. I didn't hold back a resigned sigh at the sight of Nuvian. He stood where the path widened, flanked by two Guardians I'd never met. Both of them had unsheathed their swords, and the glass-like edges shimmered in the firelight. Nuvian's yellow dreadlocks hung free and framed his sharp face.

Laurie had halted a safe distance away. I came up behind him and stood so close I could've rested my hand on his back… then I caught a whiff of the smell stuck to his clothes, and the temptation to touch Laurie evaporated.

"Miss Sworn," the queen's Right Hand said, reclaiming my attention.

To faeries like him, dropping someone's title was an insult. I pretended to gasp, and my hand flew to my chest. "*Nuvian*. Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"We haven't received a formal invitation from Her Majesty," Laurie interjected, his gaze darting downward before smoothly rising back to Nuvian's. He'd seen the Guardian touch the hilt of his sword, too. "But we come with no ill will toward this Court. We simply seek an audience with Queen Viessa."

"You seek to start a war," the other faerie said, his remote expression at odds with the fury in his eyes. "Do you think we're completely cut off from the outside world?"

"Yes," I answered flatly.

Laurie rushed to speak again, but the corners of his mouth were tilted upward, and I knew that he was enjoying this. "So you've heard that I hosted Lady Sworn at the Seelie Court tonight, what of it?" he questioned. "That doesn't make her your enemy. She's still unclaimed. A sovereign nation, as it were."

Nuvian's nostrils flared now. "I will not have the bloodline heads questioning Queen Viessa's loyalty to this Court. Your presence will cast doubt upon her, not to mention what the presence of a *vampire* will do."

He glanced at Gil long enough to show a flash of disdain and hostility. Only a promise stopped me from bringing the faerie to his knees. *For whatever it's worth, you have my promise that I will never use my abilities on you again*, I'd once told him. The words echoed through my head as I strove for control. Gil's side of the bond was dim and quiet. Knowing Nuvian's comment hadn't hit its mark helped me control the dark power rumbling inside.

After a few seconds I said, raising my eyebrows, “You better let your queen decide that for herself, Nuvs. I may not know her as well as you do, but I do think Viessa would be unhappy to find out you turned her ally away. Her very powerful ally.”

Tension in the tunnel thickened. If Nuvian had hated me before, there was no word for the intensity of his loathing now. He knew we had him. The fae were brutal, at times even gruesome, but they followed the rules when it came to politics. Even Laurie.

As we waited for his response, the seconds thudding in my chest like a countdown, I watched a crafty gleam enter Nuvian’s eyes. And I knew, before he opened his mouth, that I wouldn’t like what came out of it.

Then Nuvian threw me off guard even more by saying, “Forgive me. You’re right, of course. We should go without delay. Queen Viessa is in the throne room.”

His demeanor was almost… cordial. It took me a moment to think of the word because it had never applied to Nuvian before. My mind raced to figure out what the catch was. Unsurprisingly, Laurie caught on before I did. “We humbly request a show of hospitality before we present ourselves, Sir Nuvian,” he demurred. “In our current state, we’re not fit company for a queen.”

“I agree, but there must be no more delay,” the other male said, sounding anything but regretful. “If you’re her welcome ally, as you claim, she’ll want to see you straightaway.”

With that, he turned on his heel and walked away. The others immediately moved into formation, their leather armor creaking into the stillness.

I gritted my teeth and started after them, knowing any arguments would be futile. Nuvian wanted to humiliate me for that little scene I’d made with the werewolves. Well, the joke was on him—I didn’t give a shit what any of these faeries thought, no pun intended. Yanking my half-frozen dress off the ground, I lifted my chin and walked faster. Laurie and Gil strode on either side of me.

The pace Nuvian set was so grueling that we reached the other side of the maze in a few minutes. More additions had been made to the Mural of Ulesse, I noted as we strode out of the passageway. New brushstrokes, spanning two walls that formed a corner to the far right of the door, depicted the battle between Viessa and Collith. The two faeries faced each

other, arms thrown out, the air between them crackling with ice and fire. His face was hard and grim while hers was twisted in determination. Looking at them now, it seemed impossible that they'd once been lovers.

The image lingered on my mind as our small party walked through the wide, arched doorway.

I'd hoped to never step foot in this room again. The moment I was past the threshold, memories flew at me like a host of furious spirits. I heard a whip coming down, again and again. I felt the weight of that wooden crown land on my head. I saw the blood running from Jassin's ears, nose, and eyes after I'd killed him. I watched Collith's face change when he saw me at Viessa's side the night I gave her his throne. So much fear. So much pain.

To distract myself, I turned my attention to every detail around us, like Finn or Lyari would. The crowd was larger than I thought it would be. Viessa must've been throwing a feast, or the fae were celebrating something. Everything was unexpectedly elegant, especially when compared to the first time I'd done this walk. A string quartet played in one corner, and the melody, amongst all the murmurs and tinkling laughter, was distinctly… merry.

Unnerved, I surveyed the clusters of figures surrounding an empty dance floor—I knew it was a dance floor, because the stone flagstones had been covered in perfectly smooth tiles that looked like ice—and pretended not to hear the distressed exclamation of a female who'd detected the stench rolling off my gown. The current style at Court seemed to involve a lot of brown fur, I saw with distaste. Dozens of courtiers wore pieces of it like shawls, and others had made it into dresses. It made an odd contrast with the refined wine glasses and champagne flutes many of them held in their long fingers.

At least Chandrelle and Tarragon look normal enough, I thought as I passed them. I searched for other council members I knew, like the Tongue, Eamon, or Yarrow, but they were curiously absent from this gathering.

It seemed news of our arrival was already spreading. Or, more likely, our foul smell had. Faces turned and wafts of fear filled the air. I half-expected the music to come to a screeching halt. *Glad to see they haven't forgotten me.* I almost gave my old subjects a chipper wave and a smile, but then I heard Collith's voice again, advising me to play nice.

Annoying, hypocritical, self-righteous asshole. *Get out of my head.*

A fae male, thinking my glare was meant for him, glared right back. His lip curled with contempt. *Probably a Tralee or a Daenan*, I thought. They hated my guts. The Sarwraeks and Cralynns weren't my biggest fans, either. Even with Gil and Laurie behind me, I'd need to watch my back every second I was down here. Suddenly I was tempted to kick Laurie in the shin for getting me into this.

I looked away from the sneering faerie and finished my perusal of the room, still following Nuvian. The buffet table was back, its edges decorated in wreaths and silver ribbon. From this vantage point, I could see cooked turkeys, cakes, and platters covered in silver lids. Christmas trees had been placed sporadically around the perimeter of the space, glittering ornaments tucked amongst the green needles. Guardians also lined the walls, and several stood near the enormous pillars holding the ceiling up. I didn't see Lyari among them. Disappointed, I focused on the front of the room, where the Unseelie Queen sat waiting for us.

Weeks of freedom and food had done Viessa Folduin wonders. She'd also dedicated efforts to changing the dais itself, and the image she presented on that throne. More Christmas trees, more filmy drapery, more plants. Several figures stood behind her, dressed in gossamer clothing of white and silver. The colors perfectly complemented Viessa's frosty appearance. *Ladies-in-waiting*, I thought. Most were human, from what I could tell, but there was also a faerie or two.

As for what the queen wore, it was a gown Laurie would've chosen for me, if I'd been the one still sitting there. Her front was covered in delicate white lace, allowing generous peeks of the bare skin beneath. A filmy skirt flared against the base of both armrests, glimmering like the surface of a pearl. Viessa's red hair, which looked brighter than the last time I'd seen it, had been twisted into a simple chignon. It highlighted the complex beauty of her crown. Despite this, I couldn't help feeling like her ensemble was missing something. But I couldn't put my finger on it, and I was no Laurie, so I dismissed the thought.

My gaze lowered to take note of the white tiger resting at Viessa's feet. It was unchained, and its sides were round, as if the animal had recently fed. Its fur gleamed and those black, wicked-looking claws looked as though they'd been manicured. Had Viessa seriously purchased a tiger for an aesthetic flair? I bit my tongue to stop the question from coming out.

Saving me, she spoke a moment later, her voice carrying dramatically through the drafty space. “Welcome back to the Unseelie Court, Fortuna Sworn. Conqueror of the Leviathan, Challenger of the Fearless, and Slayer of the Undead. It’s good to see you again, friend.”

“Good to see you, too,” I replied, my lips twitching. So this was Viessa’s move—using me just as Collith had. Holding me up as a potential threat against those who opposed her rule. *Better not bite me, or I’ll sic my pet Nightmare on you.*

Once we were nearly upon the dais, the queen rose to her feet. Her earrings glittered like two small stars. “Allow me to show you to the guest quarters. Nuvian should have done it upon your arrival, and for that, I apologize.”

I had to give her credit—she was a good actress. Genuinely good. As Viessa floated down the steps and glided across the floor, the enormous tiger trailing after her like a housecat, the smile she gave me emanated warmth. Even I struggled not to believe it. Without acknowledging Nuvian, Viessa reached me and linked our arms together. I managed not to shiver at the touch of her freezing skin.

“Try not to look so surprised,” she said out of the corner of her mouth, propelling us forward. Her perfume teased my senses, combined with the scent of frost. It made the smell sharper, somehow. Like a rose with frozen edges. Viessa directed her pale eyes at the band and urged the wary-looking musicians, “Play, play! Please, everyone, go back to enjoying the party. I will return shortly.”

A violinist hurried to obey, and the voice of his instrument wavered into the stillness. Hearing it, the others resumed their playing, too. Viessa and I were halfway to a small doorway when someone called after us, “She should be questioned!”

Viessa stopped short, forcing the Guardians around us to do the same. It was almost comical how everyone turned at once.

The speaker was none other than Lord Micah. Surprisingly, he hadn’t conformed to the fur fiasco, and his olive skin stood out strikingly against the white dress shirt he wore. My reaction to seeing him was identical to how I’d felt meeting Nuvian in the passageway, but this time I swallowed the sigh.

Viessa, on the other hand, did nothing to hide her irritation—icicles grew from her fingertips like long, deadly claws. The faerie lord ignored

this and held his dark head high. *I am not afraid of you,* the gesture said.

"Did you say something, Micah of bloodline Shadi?" Viessa asked after a tense pause.

"Someone is murdering council members, Your Majesty, and Fortuna Sworn has made multiple threats against this Court. Publicly, I might add." Micah shot a jeer at me, and a fresh surge of dislike went through my veins. I didn't miss having to deal with this faerie. Maybe I should finally kill him, now that I was no longer obligated to let him live. Or maybe I should just let this mysterious vigilante continue their work. Sooner or later, Micah would be on the hit list, if he wasn't already.

I was still considering the possibility when Viessa asked, "Do you need to be reminded, yet again, that the council has been disbanded? Because I tire of these reminders, Lord Micah."

Silence swelled in every part of the room.

I kept my eyes on Micah, my instincts as a Nightmare perking. He was afraid of her, I realized suddenly. As the Unseelie Queen waited for a response, the temperature around us dropping, I saw his throat move. It was barely perceptible, but something told me that was only due to his centuries of courtier experience. What had Viessa done to elicit such fear?

"No. I am not speaking as a council member, Queen Viessa," Micah answered at last. His high cheekbones had reddened. "I'm merely saying that before we welcome the Nightmare with open arms, an investigation should be conducted."

Viessa allowed one more pause to thicken between them. The air seemed to crackle with hostility and clashing power. None of that showed in Viessa's voice, though. Instead it was pleasant and downright eerie. "The next time you decide to question my decisions," she said, "I will have one of my Guardians cut your tongue out. Enjoy your evening, Lord Micah."

The tiger padded after us again. We hastened through the side door, brushing past two armored faeries standing on either side of it. There were already more of them waiting within the passageway, of course. The moment there was enough room, the fae warriors planted themselves ahead and behind Viessa, and consequently, me. I felt my shoulders physically tensing, and I forced the tightness back out, exhaling under my breath.

I didn’t miss that, either—the Guardians. Constantly feeling watched, hounded, judged. Whatever guilt I’d been feeling about abandoning the Court to Viessa was overpowered by my relief, and now I really didn’t regret the choice I had made.

Something bumped the back of my leg. When I saw it was the tiger, my heart launched like a rocket, and I fought the urge to run.

“Oh, don’t mind Paul,” Viessa said, noticing the exchange. There was affection in the way she looked back at the enormous animal.

“You named your tiger Paul?”

Viessa didn’t appreciate my tone; she shot me an irritated glance. “I can see you disapprove. I suppose I can’t fully claim innocence, since he is a pet, after all, and wild animals shouldn’t be treated as such. Would it make any difference to know the life I’ve given him is truly the best alternative? Paul was born in captivity, and by the time we met, he was too old to be released into the wild. To make matters worse, the witch selling him cast a spell to make the sale more enticing. She advertised what she’d done on a cardboard sign—wrote it in black marker. I’m not sure why that’s always bothered me.”

Her voice had gone quiet with remembrance. I peered back at the cat again, telling myself that I had too many questions to ask the Unseelie Queen. I didn’t have any energy to spare on chitchat.

“What was the spell?” I asked. Okay, I’d admit it. I was invested in Paul the fucking tiger now.

The corners of Viessa’s mouth deepened, not out of humor, but sorrow. “It was a binding drenched in docility. He’s unable to attack anyone. He struggles to consume meat. He even has an aversion to using his teeth. All those beautiful, ferocious instincts silenced forever. Out there, Paul would starve. I’ve paid dozens of witches to try reversing it, but every one of them says the same thing. The spell can only be undone by the one who originally created it.”

“Let me guess,” I said softly. “She’s dead.”

She nodded. “It took my investigator a year to find her, but by then, it was too late. The medical report said her heart had given out. I suspect it was an effect of all the black magic. You’re familiar with tragic stories, of course. It’s easy to forget that about you, since you’re one of the strongest creatures I’ve ever met. Godly, really. I get incredibly jealous sometimes.”

Her voice was matter-of-fact. The compliment took me off guard, and I faltered. I cleared my throat. “Thanks. So what did you do that made Micah so—”

“Viessa.”

Nuvian’s came from behind, making me jump. He’d been silent for so long, and I’d gotten so absorbed by Paul’s story, that I had started to forget he was there. Or anyone else, for that matter. Viessa just let out another sigh and stopped. I followed the queen’s gaze to her brother, who’d halted in the middle of the path.

“Yes?” she said, visibly striving for patience.

Viessa wasn’t the only one. Nuvian’s words were clipped, his expression dark as a stormcloud. “A word with you, please.”

She sighed again, but this time it was through her nostrils. In the brief time it took to do this, a girl appeared through the wall of muscled faeries. I felt Gil go rigid, a dead giveaway that she was human. I’d learned things from the echoes of his hunger, one of which being how potent mortal blood was. There was something more urgent about it. More vital.

Why was she here?

This mortal didn’t look prepared to defend herself against a vampire in the grips of bloodlust. She wasn’t frail or cowering, but her fear tasted like pepper and wariness lived in her eyes. Her clothes looked more suited for an office than a den of vipers. Was she a visitor to the Unseelie Court? A… friend of Nuvian and Viessa’s?

My questions were irrelevant right now. I monitored Gil, worried this was the moment he lost control. Viessa addressed the girl in a far kinder tone than the one she’d used with Nuvian. “Rachel, show our guests to their rooms,” she instructed.

When I saw the girl bow, my uncertainty vanished. All at once, my power rushed to the surface, crackling just beneath my skin. Sensing something was amiss, the girl fumbled over her response. “Of c-course, Your Majesty.”

Viessa turned back to me, already frowning. She’d felt the shift, too. Some of the Guardians had unsheathed their weapons. “You made a blood oath,” I said with stiff-lipped fury.

Understanding flashed in the faerie queen’s expression. “Calm yourself, Nightmare. Rachel isn’t a slave. I made some adjustments to the budget and the Unseelie Court now has a respectably paid staff, who have

all signed a nondisclosure agreement should they decide to leave their position. We also offer an excellent work study program."

Hearing this, the anger left my body. I stood there and tried to think of a graceful response, but I couldn't think past the shame. Why hadn't I thought of a solution like that?

Viessa spared me from forming a response. "Once I'm finished with Nuvian, I really should return to the party. One of our own just landed a seat on the Senate, if you hadn't heard. But you and I will speak soon. Tomorrow, if you've had enough rest by then. You're welcome to stay for as long as you need. Sleep well, Lady Sworn."

"Hey," I said. Viessa paused and glanced back, her eyebrows going up in a silent question. "Is Lyari here? Is she okay?"

The Unseelie Queen smiled again. Something about this one seemed more real than the last. "I have no doubt she'll be knocking at your door the second her shift ends tomorrow morning," she assured me. "When I heard you'd arrived, I sent word that she could be reprieved, of course… but you know how she is."

I was smiling a little, too. I did know how Lyari was. Once she committed to something, even something like a guard shift, she was all in.

Viessa started down the tunnel again, accompanied closely by Nuvian. Rachel didn't delay leading us in the other direction. I only looked back once, and we'd already covered so much ground that Viessa and Paul were pale smears in the darkness. I faced forward again, my lips twisted in thought.

The four of us were silent during the rest of the journey. Rachel stopped beside a door covered in carvings of bears, folding her hands in front of her. *Smart*, I thought—she was clasping her fingers together to hide how they trembled. There was an awareness to her fear that indicated it was more than survival instincts. She'd either been warned that Gil was a newborn vampire or she had a healthy fear of her employers. Either way, that fear meant she'd survive longer down here.

"This will be your room, Prince Laurelis. Yours is the next one down, sir," Rachel added. This was to Gil. Nothing showed on her face, and if there wasn't the flavor of pepper on my tongue, I wouldn't have known how scared she was. "Baths have been prepared for you."

"Oh, thank fuck," Gil said, leaving us without hesitation. He kicked the door shut and I heard his footsteps move farther into the room. Then,

nothing.

Rachel turned to me. She tried to hide her relief, but it was evident in the lines of her body. “Your rooms are a bit farther, Lady Sworn.”

Realizing what this meant, I nodded and faced Laurie. It made me nervous, separating like this, and I didn’t like that I’d come to depend on him in some small way. My gaze met his. There was a dim reflection of my face in those metallic depths, and I saw that, unlike Rachel, I was doing a terrible job at hiding how I felt. I forced myself to look away and say, “I’ll see you tomorrow. Sleep well.”

There was a hint of amusement in Laurie’s voice as he adopted my tone. “Until the morning, Lady Sworn. Your absence will be such sweet torture. I shall comfort myself with many, many dirty dreams.”

For a moment, I considered throwing my shit-covered boot at him. Laurie probably knew what I was thinking, as per usual, because he slipped into his room without another word. The door hit the shoddy frame with a dull sound.

Feeling as though I’d returned to solid ground, I rolled my eyes and followed Rachel. The human had already started down the passageway—she was clearly eager to be rid of her charges. Less than a minute later, we arrived at a door adorned with carvings of birds. The feathers were so detailed that their outspread wings looked as though they were about to flap at any moment. Immune to its beauty, Rachel pushed the door open for me and stood to the side, allowing me to enter first.

The room was not grand or surprising in any way, but it was comfortable. As promised, a hot bath awaited. The tub had been placed beside a bright, crackling fire. It took all my self-control not to start undressing then and there. I turned back to Rachel and tried not to look impatient.

“Will there be anything else?” she asked from the doorway. “If you’re hungry, I could see what we have in the pantries.”

I hadn’t eaten in hours, but I wasn’t hungry. Not after so much adrenaline and wading through tunnels of shit. All I wanted was to step into the bathtub. “No, but thank you,” I replied, mustering a weak smile.

Once again, Rachel couldn’t conceal her relief. Murmuring a polite farewell, she quickly retreated and closed the door behind her. The moment she was gone, I yanked the ruined gown off, and I groaned out

loud when the hot water touched my skin. I sank the rest of the way down and groaned again, the sound stark in the silence.

For a few minutes, I closed my eyes and reveled in the delicious heat. Then I sat upright and got to work. The water changed color from my efforts.

I'd just finished scrubbing the last of the filth away when someone knocked on the door. *Probably Lyari.*

I hurried to rise from the tub and reach for the robe. I crossed the flaps over me and knotted the belt at my waist. Knowing Lyari's enhanced senses would hear me, I spoke as I went to pull the door open. "I never thought I'd see the day when you—"

The rest of the sentence lodged in my throat, and as I stood there, I couldn't decide whether to be pissed or terrified.

Savannah Simonson stood in the passageway.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

My first instinct was to slam the door in her face.

My second instinct was to pause. To assess, rather than react. I held the edge of the door so tight that the wood creaked. As I appraised the necromancer who was responsible for Fred's death, who had abandoned a nephew I adored, she didn't say a word. She was Fallen, so she'd probably sensed my power. It simmered under my skin like a river of lava beneath the Earth's crust, dangerously close, lethally hot. Ready to explode.

Savannah looked different from the last time I'd seen her—*better*, I admitted reluctantly. Her green eyes, which had been hazy and frantic in the throne room, were now calm and clear. Her auburn hair, previously in a pixie cut, had grown slightly. It curled becomingly around her ears, gleaming like she'd just washed it. She wore a long-sleeved gown of gray wool, probably borrowed from a courtier, and I could see that her body was no longer skin and bones beneath it. The fae had been feeding her well, apparently.

At last I said, my voice flat, "I'm surprised you're still here. Mercy mentioned you were going to stay with her."

Savannah swallowed when I spoke, and her fear filled the air around us. I wasn't tempted by it, because the thought of being in her head was repulsive. I didn't need to hear Fred and Emma's screams or witness the dark spell that had gone so terribly wrong.

Despite this, I still caught a glimpse of something, an image in Savannah's mind. The memory was so vivid that it had to be new. The necromancer stood in a high-ceilinged room that was utter chaos. There

were rows of tables from end to end, covered in items that were useful to tinctures and spells. Shelves covered the walls, lined with jars, plants, and tools. In one corner, rusty cages had been stacked like building blocks.

Savannah and the Tongue faced each other near a soot-blackened fireplace. Judging from their postures, the pair were clearly in the middle of an argument. Light from the flames moved over Savannah's cheek. *I'm going to see her,* she told her teacher.

No. It's too dangerous, he'd said. Savannah took a pointed step toward the door. The Tongue seized her arm in a grip that looked painful, but she wrenched free and hurried out, ignoring him when he called her name.

This is why The Tongue wasn't in the throne room, I thought. He'd been trying to stop his apprentice from coming here. The faerie's caution wasn't entirely unreasonable—last time he and I saw each other, I might've threatened to decapitate him.

"That was the plan, but the Tongue offered me an apprenticeship position," Savannah replied after a pause of her own. Her face was pale and strained. "Considering the fae burn their dead, this is the safest place for me to be. Mercy agreed."

"Is that why you left Denver? Because of the zombies?" I asked. But we both knew what I was really wondering. *Is that why you left Matthew?*

I hadn't moved or let go of the door, and Savannah looked small and exposed standing there in the dim passageway. My question seemed to spark something inside her, though. The necromancer lifted her chin and met my gaze. Her voice was more steady as she answered, "No. I left because of the Witch Killer."

Frowning, I wracked my mind for any reference or memory of that name. But if my mother had ever mentioned it in her lectures, or if I'd read of it, I couldn't remember. Weariness set upon me like a beast with claws and teeth. Suddenly I wanted nothing more than to turn away and fall face-first onto that bed.

Out loud I said, "Explain."

Savannah swallowed again. "Someone is killing witches. It started happening a few months ago. A sister sent me a warning. It was just a few days after… after I came to your house."

I snorted. "Oh, is that what you tell yourself? That you just came to Granby for a visit? You *sold us out*, Savannah. A good man died because of you. A really good man."

The hypocrisy of my fury wasn't lost on me. I'd killed people, as well, and it was possible some of them hadn't been monsters. It was easier to assume they were, in order to justify their terrible deaths. *Their terrible murders*, I thought with a wince. I'd never had a chance to go back and attend to the bodies. Did anyone find them? Collith had found out, somehow, and knowing him, he'd probably taken care of everything.

The thought didn't bring me peace. What if there were people in the world wondering what had happened to a person who'd been at that black market? Even slavers had families, not to mention the sellers who might've been hawking items far more innocent. There could be sons and daughters out there, brothers or sisters, laying awake every night as unanswered questions harrowed them. The same questions I had been haunted by for most of my life.

Never again. Never again could I lose control like that.

Savannah's voice penetrated the fog of guilt around me. Blinking, I clung onto her words as if they were a way out of it. "…performed a Reading for my future," she was saying, her stance still wary, "and I saw that dark force come for me. It killed Matthew, too."

When Savannah said her son's name, her voice cracked. She looked down at her feet for a moment, visibly gathering her composure. I waited silently, my face hard and pitiless—part of that was to conceal the storm in my heart, but also because it would take more than one conversation to make me trust Savannah Simonson. After a few seconds, the necromancer lifted her head again. Her eyes were dark and tormented, shining with unshed tears.

"But Readings always have a cost," she finished, her voice getting firmer. "It showed me other things, too. The deaths of people I care about. I experienced each one like it was my own, and by the end of it, I was practically insane. I held it together long enough to pack Matthew's things and bring him to you, but after that day, I couldn't tell you where I went. What I did. Eventually, I found a Door, and it brought me to you."

Ah, I thought. So that was why she'd barged into the Unseelie Court all those weeks ago. I remembered the wild hair, the mindless shouting. But here she stood now, clean and collected, for the most part. The effects of the Reading must've faded with time, especially once she'd landed in Zara's care.

Savannah waited for my response. Exhaustion had come over me like a caffeine crash, though, and suddenly I didn't care about where she'd been. The bed behind me crooned like a sirensong. "Why did you really come here, Savannah?" I asked, trying not to slump against the door.

Her throat worked, and then she said, "I want to see Matthew."

Unsurprised, I gave her a small, humorless smile. "That's not my decision to make."

"I know. I was hoping you…" Savannah stopped to take a breath, then continued, "I'd hoped you would mention it to Damon for me. I would call him myself, but there's no signal down here, and I don't… I don't go to the surface."

I ignored a petty urge to remind Savannah that she'd have to go to the surface if she wanted to see her son. It would only be a childish attempt to hide my own terror, which struck like a lightning bolt at the thought of losing Matthew. He'd become such a light in our lives, and being a father had brought Damon back to life. It felt impossible to imagine the loft without Matthew's laughter echoing through it. But… this still wasn't my decision to make. Even if I did want to tell Savannah where she could shove her request.

"I'll pass on the message," was all I said.

Savannah gave me a look of such gratitude that I tensed, worried she'd try to hug me. "Thank you, Fortuna," the necromancer replied.

When I heard the sincerity in her voice, I caught myself softening toward her. Forgiving her. It was easy enough to reverse that, though, and turn my heart back into stone—all I had to do was close my eyes to hear the crack of Fred's ribs as he'd been torn apart, along with Emma's agonized, horror-filled screams. There was no forgiving a betrayal like Savannah's.

And if redemption was out of the question for her, I didn't deserve to be forgiven for what I'd done, either.

I stepped back and closed the door in Savannah's face.

As a latch fell into place, I waited to hear the sound of departing footsteps. There were none, and the air was so still that I would've known if Savannah had moved away. She was probably wondering if there was anything else she could say, or worrying that I wouldn't actually speak to Damon. Guilt gnawed at me. I closed my eyes and battled against it, holding the robe so tightly that my nails bit through the silk. Savannah

lingered in the passageway for another moment or two, but it wasn't safe out there, especially for anyone who wasn't a faerie. Eventually she did leave, and her shoes made faint sounds over the dirt.

Once it was evident she was gone, my shoulders drooped. A log on the fire shifted, creating a faint shower of sparks. The flare of light drew my attention back to that bed. Sleep was calling to me again, but I forced myself over to the washstand, where I brushed my teeth as quickly as I could. Then, at long last, I went over to that glorious bed. My veins hummed with anticipation as I took off the robe and reached for a nightgown resting on the edge of the mattress.

A familiar voice spoke into the ringing quiet. "I suppose making you aware of my presence would be the gentlemanly thing to do."

"Laurie! What are you doing?" Glaring at him, I snatched up the nightgown and held it against me.

Across the room, Laurie stepped into the slant of firelight, and the sight of him made my mouth go dry. He wore a white linen shirt, the buttons at the collar undone. He stood with his hands shoved in the pockets of a pair of jeans. I'd never seen Laurie with his hair wet, and there was something deeply masculine about how it had been raked back. Those silver strands gleamed in the light, and they looked darker than usual. Almost as dark as his eyes. Seeing them, something deep inside me shivered.

The sensation quickly abated when I remembered that Laurie could sense arousal. Panicking, I pressed the nightgown even tighter against my body and pointed at the door. "Get out."

Laurie didn't move. His gaze never left mine, even when I accidentally exposed a breast. "You saved my life back in those tunnels," he said.

I was so flustered that I didn't know what he meant at first. When I remembered that he'd been *stabbed* less than two hours ago, heat spread through my cheeks. Damn, it had been a long day.

"Yeah, well, letting you die would've put me on Mab's shit list," I countered, finally turning away to yank the nightgown over my head. My voice was muffled as I added, "And your mother is downright terrifying."

I faced Laurie again, running a hand through my own wet hair. This was the part he should've smiled or acted like I'd offended him. But the look on his face was like a static shock, and the tiny smile hovering around my lips vanished.

It had become second nature to spar with this faerie prince, but it also served another purpose—it kept things between us predictable. Distant. Safe. He was Laurie, my friend, my backup, my warmth. The one I could depend on for amusing commentary or a pithy remark that was sure to piss everyone off.

The look on his face made it clear that tonight was different.

Keeping his hands in his pockets, Laurie closed the space between us. Unease whispered through my thoughts. *What is he doing?* I almost gave in to the urge to back away, and only stubbornness kept me there. I stood like I was rooted in place, ready for battle. As Laurie neared, I arched my head back and met his gaze.

He searched my expression and murmured, "I'm not sure I'll ever be able to forget the sound of it."

"The sound of what?" I asked, still striving to act normally. To pretend that I wasn't affected by his proximity or the intoxicating scents coming off him.

"Your voice," Laurie answered. The fire popped and crackled behind him. "You asked me if I could heal, and even though I wasn't able to answer, I heard you. I almost didn't trust my own senses. Fortuna Sworn was afraid… and she was afraid for *me*. I've only heard you talk like that on one other occasion."

Other occasion? I echoed silently, confused. It was difficult to think over my frantic heartbeat, and it took an additional moment or two to figure out what Laurie meant. He was talking about the night Collith had died. That mind-numbing, awful night I'd let the darkness inside me win and I had become someone my parents would've been ashamed of.

Now tremors ran through my frame that had nothing to do with Laurie. "Do you want a drink?" I asked impulsively, spinning away.

His silence didn't deter me. Feeling jittery, I went to the bar cart and plucked the top off a decanter. There were four glasses on a small shelf, and I poured amber liquid into two of them. Listening to the trickle of the whiskey had a calming effect—it would be easy to close my eyes and pretend I was back at Bea's, running between the dining room and the bar, going through motions that had become so familiar I could do them in my sleep.

By the time I carried the drinks back to Laurie, it felt like I was back on solid ground.

He leaned against one of the bedposts, still quiet, still watching me with that fathomless expression. His behavior was so unsettling that I almost expected him to reject the glass when I held it out, but Laurie took it without comment. I considered making a toast. The glass felt so heavy in my hand, though, and we needed to talk about tomorrow. Did Laurie have a plan? How long would we be here?

His voice drew me from a haze of worry and fatigue. “Does your mind ever stop moving? I can hear it from here.”

“I could ask you the same question,” I countered, startled to hear myself slur. It wasn’t because of the drink; I’d barely had any.

Giving in to the exhaustion, I turned and crawled onto the bed. I was too tired to care that I was in a short nightgown, and I also didn’t care when drops of whiskey sank into the bedspread. A sigh slipped through my parted lips. Resting the glass on my stomach, I stared up at the ceiling and tracked a subtle warmth making its way through my body.

“I never thought I’d find myself back here.” I said it in a whisper.

I heard the dull sound of Laurie setting his glass down. He moved to the other side of the bed and eased down beside me. That enticing smell teased my senses again, as if the soap he’d used had been imbued with bits of sage and oak. When the seconds ticked by and Laurie didn’t bring up the incident in the sewers again, I began to relax.

Then he said, “You know, I can think of a way to make you forget where we are. Well, for a few hours, at least. They expect us to, anyway. I heard some *very* pointed remarks in the throne room.”

I turned my head to look at him, and Laurie looked back unrepentantly. “Are you trying to make an argument that because everyone thinks we’re having sex... we should be having sex?”

“Well, it was worth a try.”

His flippancy bothered me, and I couldn’t hold back a frown. “So flattering.”

“I don’t see the problem, Fortuna.” Laurie lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “Life is like a swingers party—a series of perfect strangers fucking each other.”

“Except we’re not strangers, are we?” I pointed out, stung. My reaction disturbed me even more, though.

“No. No, we’re not.” That strange softness had returned to Laurie’s voice. We looked at each other, our faces a breath apart on the bed. Then

Laurie flashed his impish grin and said, “We’re not strangers, but we could certainly know each other much, much better.”

Disappointment stirred in my chest, startling me. Why should I feel disappointed? Laurie was just settling back into our roles, maintaining the status quo. It was exactly what I’d wanted a few seconds ago, and Laurie had seen that. He’d interpreted the moment I turned my back on him as rejection. Maybe it had been.

My confusion mounted, causing a restless feeling to take hold. I sat upright and nearly spilled what remained of the drink. I angled my body toward Laurie, but I didn’t look at him as I said, “We should call it a night. You may be immortal, but you still need to sleep like the rest of us lowly creatures.”

Once again, Laurie chose to remain silent. Moving faster, wide awake now, I got off the bed and strode to the door. I pulled it open and stepped aside, expecting that Laurie would sift before I’d even turned around. But he got up with a small hop, moving as though his bones were hollow. He was trying to distract me from the fact that he hadn’t poofed back to his room, I thought. My grip tightened on the glass I was still holding.

Was it really just about conserving his power? What if the Rat King’s healer hadn’t been able to fully restore him? Maybe that was why Laurie had been so insistent on hiding here, instead of going home—he was weak right now.

He’d certainly succeeded in not looking weak, though. Laurie sauntered past me and started down the passageway, saying over his shoulder, “Good night, Fortuna.”

“Good night, Laurie,” I said to his retreating back. I leaned my head against the doorjamb and watched him go. Of its own volition, my gaze dropped down, taking note of the muscled curve to his ass, which was enunciated perfectly by the pants he wore, of course.

“What’s the secret?” I called after Laurie impulsively, knowing as I did that I was just looking for a reason, any reason at all, to keep him in this passageway a little longer. Even though I’d been the one to kick him out in the first place.

The faerie turned with his hands in his pockets, creating an elegant silhouette, as if every moment was a camera and the world was Laurelis Dondarte’s audience. “Secret?” he repeated.

“I’ve been meaning to ask for a while, but something always seems to come up. How is it that you, and Collith, and so many others I’ve met lately can see my real face?”

Laurie hesitated. As the quiet stretched into a thick heat that wrapped around us, despite the chill that always clung to the air underground, I realized that I was genuinely invested in his response—Laurie and Collith’s ability to see past the Nightmare illusion had never been explained, not really. And the fact that he still hadn’t answered made it even more intriguing.

Probably seeing how my interest had sharpened, the corners of Laurie’s mouth tilted into a small, soft smile. The way his gaze lingered on my face felt equivalent to someone running a fingertip over my skin or exhaling along the sensitive curve of my throat, and suddenly it was difficult to remember what I’d asked him in the first place.

This time, I didn’t turn away.

When Laurie finally spoke, I discovered that the smile had tucked itself inside his voice, too. “We can see your face, my queen, because there are some people in the world who perceive authenticity as true beauty,” he said.

It was the purest thing I’d ever heard anyone say, and the fact it came from the mouth of a faerie wasn’t lost on me. Nor that the faerie was Laurie, of all people. He kept staring down at me, and I faintly wondered when he’d stopped smiling. There was a torch burning directly to the right of us, and it danced across his eyes, making it possible to see a dim outline of my face in them. It was a face I’d seen a thousand times, more, but in Laurie’s eyes I saw someone else.

“I look like my mother,” I told him, surprising myself.

Laurie moved closer. “What was her name?”

For the first time, I remembered Mom without thinking of how she’d died. “Christine. Her name was Christine.”

“Beautiful.”

“Yeah. It is.” I tipped my head back to look at Laurie more fully, and I finally returned his smile. It felt like my heart was a door without a knob, and for all the time I’d known Laurie, he had been skimming his fingertips along its edges in search of a latch or a key. And now, at this moment, it had simply cracked open for him.

My mouth went dry with panic, the same reaction I'd battled every time Collith tried to get through that door, too. Once again, I wanted to retreat or say something to put us firmly back in familiar territory.

But I was a Nightmare. I knew what giving in to fear did to people. They lived ordinary lives, and they missed out on the amazing and the remarkable. What was the point of a life like that?

I raised my gaze back to Laurie's and forced myself to add, "Sometimes I avoid mirrors, because I see Mom in my reflection and I wonder… would she be ashamed of me? If she were here now?"

Toward the end, a note of torment slipped into my voice. It was a thought I'd been avoiding for a long time, probably since Damon was taken. It had crept closer with every stupid decision, every failure, every dark moment. I'd never told anyone this, not even Emma. Lately, whenever it got past my defenses, the thought about Mom was immediately followed by another one.

Why had I only seen Dad during my brush with death?

Before my conversation with him, I'd been certain of what came after our time in this world. The stories of Heaven and Hell were true. Or some of them, at least. But Dad had come back, somehow. If he'd been able to do it, why not Mom?

Maybe she'd chosen not to.

My mental freefall came to an abrupt halt when Laurie placed the crook of his index finger beneath my chin and gently lifted my face, sending a startled burst through me; when had I looked down? Laurie held my gaze, his focus never wavering as he said slowly, "I didn't know your mother, but I can tell you with absolute certainty—more than I've ever known anything over the course of my existence—that she would not be ashamed of you, Fortuna."

That door inside me opened wider. Clearing my throat, I pulled away slightly and brushed my fingers over my cheeks. I gave Laurie a tremulous smile. "You know, I've been inside your head, and I wasn't able to find much. Don't you have fears like that? Insecurities?"

"Wrinkles," Laurie said, shuddering. "Thankfully, evolution took care of that for me. Immortality is nature's Botox."

My disappointment was undeniable now—I'd shown him my insides, and I'd been hoping for something from him. This time, he'd been the one

to succumb to fear. I pasted on another smile, skilled as any fae courtier now. “Sleep well, Laurie.”

There was a flash of something in his eyes, but it was gone too quickly. In less than a moment, the Seelie Prince wore his usual expression, a combination of arrogance and mischief hidden behind an aristocratic, angelic face. “Good night, Fortuna.”

I didn’t linger to watch the darkness swallow him.

As I closed the door, I realized that I wasn’t tired anymore. The conversation with Laurie had awoken something in me, and I needed to get this energy out. I scanned my surroundings in search of something to do. There was a suit of armor in the corner of the room, complete with a sword resting upon a stand. I walked over to it and reached for the weapon.

It was lighter than I was used to—I’d been training with overly heavy swords to build up muscle. I practiced several strikes in slow motion, with exaggerated movements, just as Adam had shown me. I was about to start over again when there was yet another knock on my door. I went still, and for a moment, all I could do was stare. It felt like I was at the starting line of a race.

When I did finally open the door, I did it slowly, knowing who I would find on the other side. No, *hoping* that I knew.

For a beat, Laurie and I just looked at each other.

Then he stepped forward, buried his fingers in my hair, and kissed me.

The sword slipped from my fingers. Even as my senses were overcome with the taste of him, I was aware of another flavor on my tongue. Juniper, maybe, or something similar. *Laurie’s fear,* a distracted voice whispered in my head.

A second later, I put two and two together. *This* was his answer to my question. *Don’t you have fears like that? Insecurities?* I’d asked.

We tumbled back into the room, kissing as if it would be our last, but I knew it was only the beginning. We’d started something here, crossed a line that couldn’t be uncrossed. Every second that I didn’t pull away, I was making a choice.

Halfway across the room, Laurie slowed, and then he opened his eyes. I expected them to be hazy or hungry, but his gaze was clear as ever. I tangled my fingers in his shirt and pulled him back to me. Within an instant, Laurie’s mouth came down on mine again. I felt the bedpost

against my back as he pushed me into it. He tugged at the straps of my nightgown until they hung limply on my shoulders.

As the silk slipped down to my waist, Laurie pulled back, abruptly ending our frenzied kiss. He watched my breasts rise and fall with each breath. Without any warning, he dipped his head and caught my nipple between his teeth. There was something so forbidden, so dirty about that. Then, with one simple motion, he coaxed the nightgown downward and watched it pool around my feet. His eyes rose slowly. Leisurely.

When his gaze met mine, I was shocked to see them blazing with adoration.

Laurie must've seen something in my expression, because he cocked his head and asked, his voice devoid of any teasing or feeling, "Do you want this?"

"Yes." But then I hesitated. Part of me wanted to stay silent, to be selfish and impulsive. Recent events had taught me the value in making a different choice, which was why I forced myself to add, "I'm afraid my reasons for wanting it will make you stop."

Laurie kept his eyes on my face, as if he'd forgotten that I was naked. "What are your reasons?"

I swallowed—all my instincts fought against vulnerability. Telling the truth of what was in my heart. "To experience that sort of pleasure again. To feel less alone. To stop thinking about him."

Laurie didn't need to ask who I meant. He skimmed his finger down the side of my face and murmured, "If you're expecting a noble response, you're in for a disappointment. But, trust me, it will be the only one of the night."

Before I could say anything, he leaned down and reclaimed my lips. Deeply and desperately. His hands fisted on my bare back. We moved again, never coming up for air. I unbuttoned Laurie's shirt and pushed it off his shoulders. The zipper on his jeans came down with a single tug. With every abandoned article of clothing, I knew we were making our way around the bed.

Fears haunted me like ghosts, whispering in my ears. They reminded me of how scared I'd been of this—giving any piece of myself to Laurie. Powerful, mysterious, cunning Laurie.

The ghosts spoke of the crossroads, too. Forced me to relive it.

We'd just laid down on the bed when I pulled back and searched Laurie's gaze. My heart pounded like a series of fireworks going off. "Do you remember the question you asked me earlier? When we were in those tunnels?" I blurted.

I wasn't sure why I'd brought it up now, but the conversation moved to the front of my mind, as if it were always ready on the sidelines.

Why didn't you kill him when you were inside his head? Laurie had asked me.

Because I didn't want to be the one to kill your brother.

Why not?

"I remember," Laurie murmured. I didn't sense any impatience in him, or confusion about my timing. Just a lazy sort of contentedness.

I swallowed, resting my hand on his warm chest. "This was why. I knew if I was the one, it would… it would change everything, and then you and I…"

What was I even trying to say? And why was I so incredibly bad at this?

Despite my fumbling, Laurie's eyes had softened. He looked down at me with an expression I'd never seen before. Something about it had me pulling him in again, kissing him as deeply as possible. I ground against him, and Laurie finished kicking off his jeans. I yanked off his boxer briefs next. Laurie shifted, kissing my stomach as he slid a condom onto his erection—it must've been in one of his pockets. *Cocky bastard*. I watched silently, aroused by the sight of Laurie touching himself.

Then he was back, kissing me again, his body settled between my legs. At the same moment Laurie began doing amazing things to my neck, I felt his cock prod my slick opening.

And I went rigid.

A soft snarl left the faerie above me, and I felt his hand grasp the back of my neck. I wasn't in that bed with Laurie, though. I'd gone somewhere else, dragged there by the ghosts.

"Look at me," he ordered. I obeyed because it was a knee-jerk reaction. Laurie's eyes bored into mine, fierce and dangerous, bright as an executioner's sword. But there was kindness in his voice as he said, "You are safe. No one is going to hurt you. Do you understand?"

I nodded, but it wasn't enough for Laurie, and he started to move away. I grabbed hold of his muscled back. He went still. "I understand," I

whispered in his ear.

The ghosts were quiet now.

I guided Laurie silently, showing him my calm expression. Without looking away, he eased himself inside me.

I was so wet that Laurie buried himself up to the hilt. He propped one arm over my head and bit my earlobe. I moaned, my core stretching to accommodate him. As Laurie teased and stimulated with some sensual movements, his mouth claiming mine, I wrapped my legs around his waist and lifted to take his length deeper. My pelvic muscles clenched. The faerie's appreciative growl rumbled in my ear an instant before he pulled out and rammed his cock deep inside again.

"This feels even better than I imagined," he breathed. A short, helpless sound was all I could manage for a response.

And then he ruined me.

Laurie didn't hold back or hesitate anymore—he held my wrists in one hand, holding them over my head, and each thrust was more powerful than the last. Ecstatic, frantic noises tore from my throat. I opened my eyes and met Laurie's again. Somehow, I knew we were both thinking the same thing. I was his, and he was mine, no matter what came after tonight.

When an orgasm rolled through me, crippling my senses, I filled the room with my mindless cry.

After the blinding sensation had ran its course, I was limp. I already wanted more, but I simply didn't have it in me. Laurie kissed my shoulder and slipped away to dispose of the condom.

I barely had enough frame of mind to remember Oliver's instructions on how to find him. *See that mountain range?*

Back in the real world, I felt Laurie tug the covers over my body, his warmth pressing close to mine. With the image of strange mountains at the forefront of my mind, I drifted away, deeper into the darkness, toward the frightening beauty of Oliver's new dreamscape.

A place that reeked of fear.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Starlight shimmered over an imperfect sheet of ice.

That was what had taken me by surprise most, I decided as Oliver and I trudged on. The ice.

I was also surprised by how quickly the land changed.

When I first arrived at the dreamscape, hours ago, twilight hovered everywhere. Our plan had worked—I'd awoken exactly where I had fallen asleep the night before. The sky was a cotton-candy pink and the sun a tiny ball of orange on the horizon. Oliver had already packed everything, including the tent we'd slept in. I blinked the sleep from my eyes and looked around, standing. The mammoth tree was less eerie with its edges softened by the fading light.

I put my backpack on, and it felt heavier than before. Oliver must've noticed my frown. "It got colder than I expected last night," he said. "I packed a few extra things, just in case that happens again."

"Oh. Thank you." I looked at him more closely and noticed that he was pale. Was there a cost to the energy Oliver expended now? What happened if he used too much of it?

To hide my worry, I started walking up the hill. Oliver caught up with two long-legged strides, shouldering his bag.

Within an hour or two, the two of us reached the end of those rolling hills. We stopped where the grass became ice, which presumably stretched all the way to that mountain pass we hoped to reach. Oliver and I lingered there without speaking for a minute, both of us caught up in our own thoughts and feelings. I hadn't expected a frozen wasteland to be part of

the dreamscape, and the sight of it made my brows lower. I wondered what it said about me that a vast part of my psyche looked like this.

“Fortuna?” Oliver asked, his eyes brightly blue in the fading light. He knew me; he knew what my fear looked like. I felt his fingertips whisper through mine, like the lightest trickle of water, and he sounded like the old Ollie again as he said, “We don’t have to do this. We can go back.”

Hearing this, my mouth pursed. Going back wasn’t an option. For better or for worse, I knew what else could be out there, and I couldn’t unknow it.

My only answer was to shift my backpack, pull my hand away, and step onto the frost-tipped grass.

Now night had claimed it all. We’d been walking most of the night, and eventually Oliver and I found ourselves next to the ocean again. I couldn’t see much of it; I couldn’t even hear it. There was just a glint in the distance every once in a while, and a vague sense of endlessness. Normally, I found the presence of water soothing, but there was nothing beautiful about that quiet, bottomless darkness. Freezing winds howled past, and it would’ve been miserable if not for the winter gear Oliver summoned while I was gone. I wore a wool hat and gloves, along with thick socks that made my hiking boots too snug, but not unbearably so.

Every few minutes, I flicked my eyes toward that distant mountain pass for motivation. The range was so vast, so tall that the peaks were covered in snow and clouds, even in the daytime. Or whatever I should call the sporadic number of hours the dreamscape was lit with sunlight. This place was supposedly created by my own mind, but the farther we ventured, the more I began to doubt it. If this were my design, I’d build my mind to follow the rules of nature, the boundaries of the real world. Why would I make a dream world that defied every rule of logic or convenience?

During those long hours of walking in the cold, I also couldn’t stop thinking about how I’d never been this far from our cottage. It went around and around in my head, incessant as a child’s fear. Maybe that was why time was acting differently. Strangely. Maybe that was also to blame for why I felt so tired. Usually, in the dreamscape, I was energized. Ready to pass the night away swimming in the sea or climbing our tall oak tree.

We weren’t even halfway to the mountain pass when Oliver stopped.

I was about to tell him I was fine, that we should keep going, but then the clouds shifted. The words faded on my tongue as I saw his expression clearly. Oliver's eyebrows were knitted together, his face turned to the horizon. The moonlight reflected off his eyes, and for a moment, it made him look like someone unfamiliar and otherworldly.

"Ollie? What is it?" I followed his gaze.

"There's something just beyond that shelf of ice," he said. But I'd already spotted it and I barely heard him; I was staring too hard at the faint movement far ahead.

I'd been right about the ocean being there. What I hadn't guessed was that it would be completely frozen over. It was lucky, really fucking lucky that we'd gotten some moonlight when we had, because Oliver and I were steps away from the edge of a cliff. The icy surface of the sea was all that awaited at the bottom.

No, I thought. *That's not all.*

A few yards ahead, the drop we'd been walking along veered into an immense ledge, like a peninsula. Except this one was made entirely of ice. The movement we'd both seen was coming from something at the base of it, so far away that I couldn't even see a shape.

"What else would be out there? It's another memory. It has to be," I said, thinking out loud. There had never been anyone else in our dreamscape, save for Oliver's shadow, and I wasn't sure that counted.

I looked over at my best friend, and I could tell that he'd reached the same conclusion as me. His mouth was tight as he scanned everything around the enormous wall of ice. "We could go to the top and look down, but that shelf is so high that we probably wouldn't see much," he muttered. "The only way to get close enough is by sea. I don't like the looks of that ice, though."

I studied the scene again, aware that with every passing second, we could lose the moonlight again. After a few seconds, I shook my head. "There's no other way. I'll have to risk walking on the ice."

"*We'll* have to risk it." Oliver didn't look away from the memory as he said it. The hard set to his jaw told me he wouldn't brook any arguments, and I didn't try to. I was done making Oliver's decisions for him, taking what little free will he had.

I'd need my strength for the hike ahead, anyway. The distance between here and the bottom of that ice shelf didn't look far, but the dreamscape

had taught me not to trust that. Oliver moved forward, and I followed suit, tightening my backpack straps as we started walking down the snowy slope.

Halfway down, without any way to explain it, the wind completely… stopped. I slowed, unnerved at the sudden, unnatural change. Oliver noticed that I'd fallen behind and turned to look at me. His cheeks slightly pinked from the cold, and his expression said the words again. *We don't have to do this. We can go back.*

I shook my head and quickened my pace to close the small distance between us.

There was no reason not to speak, and yet neither of us ventured to end the silence. There was something unnerving about the night. Maybe it was the utter lack of noise. I'd never experienced a stillness like this—even if I was sitting in a quiet room, there were always small sounds. The heat clicking on or an airplane passing overhead.

We reached the bottom, and I was relieved to discover the frozen water wasn't slippery. It was rough, covered in frozen snow drifts, and it crunched underfoot like we were walking on broken plates. I kept my eyes on that distant ice shelf. It towered over us now, high as a skyscraper. The memory still moved at its base, tiny silhouettes against the night-smeared horizon.

We were close enough to the memory now that I could see more details. I quickened my pace, frantic not to miss a moment of the past playing out in front of us.

It was me and Damon again. We were the same age as the ones who had climbed that twisted tree. There was nothing around the children sitting on the frozen sea, no other objects in the memory, but I knew we hadn't been surrounded by ice and snow when this day took place.

The younger Fortuna was wearing shorts and a white tank top, the sleeves cinched on top of my bony shoulders with bows of red ribbon. Damon, too, wore shorts. Neither of them acted bothered by the cold, though. Maybe this memory took place in summertime, but my mind hadn't retained that detail.

It felt like the theory was confirmed when I saw their hair fluttering in a breeze that wasn't there. *Good to know*, I thought, keeping my eyes on the children. Even if we found more memories, they may not be complete, like this one.

Damon wrapped his tiny arm around my shoulders. “What’s wrong, ’Tuna?” he asked.

The younger me rested her cheek against the top of her knee. She sniffed. “I overheard Mom and Dad in the kitchen this morning. She was talking about me. Worrying about my powers. Dad got upset when she mentioned something called a Reading. He said there was a cost. He was scared, Damon.”

His eyes were round with concern. Making a soft sound, Damon shifted, pressing his temple against Fortuna’s. But five-year-old boys didn’t care about much else besides having fun, and it was only a few seconds later that my brother pulled away and stood. “I know what will make you feel better,” he declared. “Let’s play the game.”

The other Fortuna shook her head, hugging herself tighter. “I don’t want to.”

“Please? Just once?”

I could see another denial in my expression, and Damon could, too—he hung his head and stuck out his lower lip. Younger Fortuna heaved a dramatic sigh and rolled onto her knees, then sat on the heels of her feet. When she got up, I remembered suddenly, there would be grass stains on her knees. Mom would sigh at the sight of them and inform me how much tights cost, beginning a lecture on financial responsibility.

She was always looking for an opportunity to teach me something new, I remembered with a soft smile.

Still humoring our brother, the other Fortuna covered her eyes. “Monster, monster, come out to play. Monster, monster, I’ve been waiting all day,” she chanted.

Beaming, Damon hurried off to hide.

And that was it. The children both vanished like spirits, the sounds of their game lingering in my ears for another moment before that, too, faded away.

It didn’t matter, though. I remembered that day now. After the other me said the silly rhyme they’d made up, she would go in search of Damon, and together, they would shriek and run as if the monster had found them both. Having seen the game now, as an adult, I didn’t understand the allure of it.

“I think it’s over,” Oliver murmured finally.

The moment he said that, I noticed how cold it was. The tip of my nose had gone numb and I could see every breath as I exhaled. Something about this place creeped me out now that I wasn't so intent on the memory. "Okay," I said heavily, releasing another cloud into the night. "Should we __"

Boom.

A crack ruptured through the place where we stood, and a scream tore from my throat. The jagged edges of the ice shot up so violently that Oliver ended up on one side, me on the other. I regained my balance at the last possible second, scanning the length of the crack with complete bewilderment. What the hell had *that* been?

Recovering quickly, Oliver started walking toward me, his body tensing to jump over the divide.

Boom.

More ice and snow flew up into the air. I held up my gloved hand to shield my face. When I lowered it again, the crack was even wider. Then I saw a divided, fan-like tail disappear beneath the black water, and in that instant I forgot how to breathe.

It's something big, a matter-of-fact voice said inside my head. A whale, maybe?

I turned in a swift circle, the plumes of my frantic breath making it difficult to see. No more cracks appeared around me. The stillness returned, broken only by Oliver.

"Fortuna, run to me," he shouted, urgently waving his hand in a *come here* gesture.

He doesn't want to move, I thought dimly. Why didn't he want to move? With a slow, wary frown, I looked down… and froze in terror.

A pair of giant, yellow eyes peered at me through the thick sheet of ice.

I was about to scream when the creature moved with supernatural speed, vanishing in a rush of black water and blue bubbles. Eyes wide, I jerked my head up to find Oliver, a warning already forming on my lips.

Then the world exploded.

The sky-shaking burst of ice and snow was so sudden that I fell, landing hard on my ass. Pain shuddered through my bones. I caught a glimpse of something dark and massive, but it went back under the water too quickly. Oliver was shouting. The adrenaline inside me was too loud,

though, and his voice was white noise as I scrambled up and turned in a circle, assessing the situation I was in. Something had come up from beneath and struck at the ice, creating a spiderweb effect. Like a baseball through a pane of glass.

The section I was standing on was almost completely separated from the rest.

Then, almost as if the creature were doing it on purpose, that great tail shot out of the sloshing waves again and obliterated the remaining strand of ice. *Boom.*

The piece I was standing on gave a violent lurch. I screamed as I lost my footing a second time. I heard Oliver shout something at the same moment I threw out my hands, landing on the sopping gloves instead of my face. *Boom.* The night shuddered again, and in the next breath I was sliding backward, falling toward the sea. Water lapped and splashed, reacting to the ice that was crumbling and sinking all around.

"Ollie!" I screamed. I yanked off the gloves, instantly throwing them away from me, and tried to find purchase on the iceberg with my nails. Bad things were waiting in those frozen depths, I could feel it. I searched wildly for Oliver, knowing even as I did that he couldn't reach me unless he swam. He would never do something that idiotic.

Goddamn it. Oliver *was* an idiot… when it came to me.

"Ollie," I started, my voice strangled. "Don't you *dare* get in that water!"

Before he could answer, a new sound echoed through the night. We both instinctively went silent. I clung to the ice, shivering, and the fine hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Every sense felt heightened. It was a feeling I had gotten before, and I'd learned to recognize the signs. Thanks to Matthew Sworn, I was good at surviving.

I was being hunted.

I didn't have a chance to think of a plan—without warning, the iceberg started righting itself again. Bewildered, I lifted my head and instantly saw why.

The creature I'd seen beneath my feet moments ago was now lumbering onto the ice, water streaming down its sides.

It had five massive flippers, three in the front and two in the back. Its head looked reptilian, but the rest of it was like a salamander, finished off with a film-edged tail. The weight of that long body was so substantial the

slab of ice beneath us had leveled out like a seesaw. Terror beat at the inside of my stomach with frantic wings. Then the creature spotted me, its yellow eyes brightening with cold, predatory eagerness. Its long, narrow snout parted, revealing two rows of pointed teeth, and let out a sound that was halfway between a hiss and a roar. I'd never heard anything like it before.

It was fucking terrifying.

A beat after I went blank with fear, a memory shot through me—books splayed open on the floor, dapples of sunlight streaming through the tall windows of my mother's office—and suddenly I knew what we were facing. I could see the drawing, along with the words beneath it.

Cetus.

In Mom's stories, it had been defeated by both Perseus and Heracles. But how? Quaking with cold and panic, I ripped through my memories. I remembered one story involving a sword, and another that mentioned Medusa's head. Neither of which were in my possession.

"Fortuna, behind you!" Oliver shouted, jabbing toward something behind me. I felt my eyes widen an instant before the ice cracked again, and I wrenched around to see the damage, only to discover a second sea monster coming out of the water. The slab of ice was bending, breaking in half.

And I was clinging to the middle, trapped between two sea monsters.

I'd barely finished the thought when one of them let out a pain-filled screech. I whirled, and my eyes widened at the sight of Oliver. Somehow, he'd clambered onto the iceberg and gotten between me and one of the oncoming cetus. His chest heaved, water clinging to every part of him, and he raised the bloody knife he must've used to stab it with the first time. The creature wasn't dead, but it was slinking backward, lowering that long body into the sea. A trail of red stained the ice all the way to the edge.

The remaining cetus made that strange noise again. It sounded more incensed this time, as if it knew what Oliver had done to its companion. Knew and planned to have its revenge.

A strong hand grabbed mine, and I whipped my head around. Oliver looked back at me, his eyes bright and blue. "We need to swim for it," he said calmly.

I darted a glance at that black, churning water. "I think I'd rather take my chances on—"

A third cetus surged out of the water, roaring so loudly the air itself trembled. Oliver and I leaped backward to avoid getting crushed by its massive body, but there was no more ice left to land on.

We tumbled into the water.

I'd never experienced such a shock of cold. I gasped without thinking, and pain tore through my lungs as I inhaled the sea. I kicked instinctively, fighting for the surface, for air. I was dimly aware of Oliver beside me, his arm around my waist. We fought together. Two or three seconds later, we both gasped as we reemerged into the night. I tried not to think about one of those creatures hurtling up from the depths and closing its jaws around my legs.

There was only one place to get out of the water, a crumpled piece of ice that made a ramp, of sorts. It would put us on the opposite side of the icy cliffside that was possible to climb, the way we'd come to get onto the ice. But every other ledge around us was too high without any way to climb it.

With no other choice, the two of us rushed toward it, neither of us making any effort to be subtle.

We heaved ourselves up, and then we were running. Our sopping backpacks thumped with every step. Behind us, there was a splashing sound, followed by a huff. Oliver and I glanced at each other, still breathing hard, and our eyes filled with silent agreement. Flee now. Reassess the plan once we got to safety.

We ran until we were well away from those broken spots in the ice, and though both of us slowed, we didn't allow ourselves to fall into a walk. We still had a ways to go until we got to the spot where we could begin the ascent back to solid ground. Without faltering, Oliver turned his backpack around, putting it on his chest. He unzipped it and took out another kitchen knife, still secured in its plastic sheath. In a deft movement that made me blink, he flipped the handle in my direction.

"You packed weapons?" I asked, surprised. It hadn't even occurred to me to ask before now—this was the dreamscape, where the only danger we ever faced was the one we posed to each other.

Oliver raised his eyebrows and produced two handguns next. He held out one of these to me, as well. "I brought several."

We were almost to the bottom of that icy outcropping, the makeshift path that would lead us up to safety. "Feel that?" Oliver said between harsh

breaths.

The ice was rumbling. No, pulsing. But I could barely feel it past the pain of my burning lungs. It was so cold that every inhale felt like needles going inside me. The ceti were beating at the ice beneath us, I realized between bursts of agony. “That’s… why you wouldn’t… move earlier,” I managed, running even faster. “They hunt… by sound.”

They were smart, too, I learned an instant later as the ice beneath the path we’d been aiming for fell away. The ceti must’ve realized we were going in one direction, making a straight shot to a place they wouldn’t be able to reach. They’d been weakening the ice with every strike, hurtling at the same spiderweb cracks over and over from the depths below.

Oliver responded at the same moment huge, gray bodies emerged from the sea like ants. Dozens and dozens of them appeared, in both directions, forming a line. They came out of the ice with too much precision, too much organization.

This is tactical, I thought. That was when I noticed how hard my body was trembling. It made sense, considering I was wearing half-frozen clothes sopping with seawater, but that wasn’t why I couldn’t stop shaking. No, the shaking was from the abrupt jolt of fear that had wracked my frame as I readied myself, accepting the grimness of our situation. There was no other way—we’d either fight our way out of this or very possibly die.

Waking up wasn’t an option. I wouldn’t abandon Oliver.

He and I stood back to back now. When the ceti first started appearing, our eyes had met, and we’d moved in unspoken agreement. Communicating in a language all our own, just as we’d always been able to do, no matter what changes came our way. My grip tightened on the gun, and a single glance told me it was loaded and ready to shoot. But as I raised my weapon, I felt the painful clench of uncertainty.

Oliver felt no uncertainty whatsoever. His body jerked, again and again, a reaction to pulling the trigger. The noise of each shot bounced off my eardrums in painful bursts. I didn’t care; I was trying to figure out how to survive this and avoid harming these creatures.

The tide of ceti surged toward us now, looking like a wave of dirty water. It was as if they’d been waiting for a signal, and the first gunshot was it. Every cetus on the ice pierced the air with their shrieks. Combined with Oliver’s shots, the night was splitting apart with sound.

Still, I didn’t shoot—my mind told me these were animals. They were terrifyingly intelligent, maybe, but animals nonetheless. This fight felt similar to those petrifying minutes I’d been battling the Leviathan. Animals were like children. They were innocents, caught up in a war they couldn’t understand or hope to defend themselves in.

“Fortuna,” Oliver said over his shoulder, his voice deliberately calm, “stop hesitating. We’re inside your head, remember? These things aren’t *real*.”

By that logic, I wanted to point out, that meant he wasn’t real, either.

But he was right. At this point, it was kill or be killed. I let out a breath, squared my shoulders, and lifted my head.

And I shot an oncoming cetus in the face.

The creature’s head exploded, and the rest of it toppled slowly into the water. It was dead. I’d killed it. The ceti didn’t wait for me to process this—they kept coming. I struggled against the panic trying its claws in. With a snarl of resolve, I put all my focus into a rhythm, a violent pattern in my head that felt like music. The knife Oliver had given me was still in my other hand, and once the ceti got close enough, I put it to use. *Aim, pull, slice, kick. Aim, pull, slice, kick.* The pattern went on and on.

The ceti had numbers, but they were slower on land. In the time it took them to rear their heads back or swing a flipper, I was there with a cut or a jab. They didn’t like pain. Most of them put their heads down and retreated, sinking into the water as if it were a dog going off to lick its wounds.

But there were some that just got angrier. Some that retaliated as they bled.

Those were the ones that frightened me most. They acted like something more than an animal. Why should there be creatures like that within the dreamscape? Trying to hurt me?

Questions that had to wait for another time. Bodies were piling up fast, so many that they began blocking the way to us like a gruesome wall. The fight went on. My face was covered in warm cetus blood, the ice stained a deep red color around my boots. *Aim, pull, slice, kick.*

“Fortuna.”

Oliver hadn’t spoken in so long that it took my mind an extra moment to realize he’d said my name. I twisted toward him, drawing my knife in an arc that cut across a cetus’s fleshy, wiggling throat. While it staggered

backward, choking, I frowned at Oliver. His expression set warning bells off inside me. “What is it? What’s happening?” I demanded.

But Oliver wasn’t paying attention to me anymore; his gaze was on the ice, scanning the area around us as if he saw something I couldn’t. “Back up,” he said suddenly.

I searched the ground even as my feet moved to obey. I’d never seen such urgency in my best friend’s eyes. We had another one of our silent communications, and in the next breath, Oliver and I broke into a run. Strangely enough, the line of ceti had hastily retreated—they were going back into the water. If our luck held, we could just leap over the gap and get to that path on the icy cliffside.

“What’s going on?” I asked again, panting.

Oliver opened his mouth to answer just as the place we’d just been standing shattered into the sky.

The ice lurched violently under our feet. We went flying, the force of the explosion causing us to land on our spines. My backpack did nothing to break the fall, and the air left my lungs in a violent rip. Gagging, I rolled another moment before coming to a stop.

For several seconds, I was paralyzed in a state of no oxygen and no ability to draw it back inside me. Then my body started working again, like a machine that had worked out a clog in its gears. I gasped in the air I so desperately needed, ignoring the pinpricks of pain as it entered my lungs. *Ollie*, I thought. *Is Ollie okay?*

Slowly, I pushed myself upright. I’d squeezed my eyes shut when I hit the ground, and now I pried them open again, terrified of what I’d see.

I breathed easier when I saw that Oliver was already recovering next to me. Following his lead, I struggled to my feet, taking stock of everything else as I did.

One good thing had come from the two of us getting thrown like ragdolls—we were now on the other side of the line the creatures had formed when they first came out of the water. But a bad thing had come of it, too. My mouth was dry as I watched another cetus rise into the open, its head a long silhouette against a wide moon.

In that instant, realization hit me. The creatures we’d been fighting all this time… they’d been the young ones. The hatchlings.

Because the immense animal lumbering out of the water, its torso so big that the ice was crumbling beneath the weight like an ancient piece of

bread, could only be their mother.

She had dozens of nipples along her underside and her leathery hide was run through with cracks. Her flippers were muscled. Meaty. One blow from those and we wouldn't have intact skulls anymore.

"There's no fucking way," I breathed, unable to comprehend the sheer size of her. We were *dead*.

Oliver grabbed my hand and dragged me into a run. I didn't fight him—it was the right call. The only call. We'd been thrown clear of the bodies and there was a straight shot to the path we needed.

More ceti were already coming out of the water, and they were slightly more versatile than their hideous mother. I faced forward again, pumping my arms harder. Oliver did the same. I could hear his breath in my ear, and the short, even bursts became something I focused on, as if I were counting reps during one of Dad's exercises. We ran faster than we ever had before, even during one of our childhood races.

Within a minute, we were at the base of the icy wall, rushing along the narrow ledges that led upward. Oliver didn't look back, and neither did I. I put one foot in front of the other, controlling my breathing as best I could. Thoughts hovered at the edge of my calm, more questions. *Later, later*, I chanted at them, timing the word with each inhale and exhale.

The fury of the ceti faded; we were out of their reach now. Though Oliver and I didn't slow, I relented the strange chant I'd been doing in my head the entire time we'd been rushing up this wall.

It seemed unlikely the creatures would follow us—those bulbous bodies hadn't looked built for land, much less climbing—but after we reached the top, we didn't pause to catch our breath. We kept going, and going, and going. Even when it became clear our boots were hitting snow and not solid ice, and there was no longer a threat of something coming at us from beneath our feet, Oliver and I didn't falter.

Once the sense of danger had passed, though, the adrenaline began to abandon me. It was only then I remembered that I'd been in the water.

Oh, God. They hurt. My fingers hurt. It was so cold, too cold, and it felt like I'd die if I didn't feel heat soon.

Stop that, Fortuna. You're not going to die, I told myself sternly. I glanced at Oliver, wondering if he was struggling, too. There was still moonlight shining down on the ice, and real alarm surged through me when I saw how starkly my friend's freckles stood out against his skin. His

lips were the palest of blues. Was that what I looked like? Could I contract hypothermia in the dreamscape, then carry that into my world? And Oliver, what would happen to him now that he couldn't heal himself at the wave of a hand?

Worry gnawed at my mind along with the cold. After a minute or so, however, the wind picked up again and provided a terrible distraction. My freezing skin felt overly sensitive, as if it was faintly throbbing. Every gust of air was like teeth and claws raking past me. That was when the shivering returned, but this time, I couldn't stop. The miserable shaking made my teeth ache, and eventually I figured out that they were chattering.

Instead of setting up camp and waiting it out, Oliver and I bent our heads down and pressed onward. I wasn't sure why, now that the ceti were well and truly behind us. Maybe Oliver was as shaken as I was by the encounter with those creatures—this had always been his safe place, too. His home. Everything was changing too much, too fast.

We hadn't been walking more than a few minutes when my legs wouldn't support me anymore. I started to slow, my knees threatening to give way. Without a word, Oliver put his arm around my lower back, underneath my frozen backpack. I looked at him through frost-tinted eyelashes, but he kept his gaze on the darkness ahead as he took most of my weight and propelled us onward. Farther away from the coast. Deeper into the wilderness. I didn't know where he was finding his strength, especially since he'd been in that water next to me. "Th-thank you," I said past tingling lips.

He didn't answer.

I decided to let Oliver determine when we should stop—it was taking all my concentration to put one foot in front of the other and keep moving forward. At some point, I put my head down. But even then, I didn't stop or fall. If Oliver could do it, so could I. He was me, and I was him.

You're not making sense anymore, Fortuna. Probably a bad sign, I thought dimly. The tingling that was in my lips had traveled to my fingertips.

Not much longer after that, Oliver set me down carefully. He made sure I didn't topple over before he took off his backpack and put that down, too. I didn't remember closing my eyes. I must have, though, because the next thing I knew Oliver was touching my arm, his voice a low murmur. I tried to raise my head. Tried and failed. I felt Oliver take hold

of me again, and we made our way into the softly-glowing tent he'd erected.

Inside, a cozy scene waited.

The tent was orange, which lent the space an idea of warmth, even if it wasn't quite there yet. Oliver had unpacked everything from our bags and set the contents out in neat rows to dry. I hadn't even felt him take mine off. He'd also unrolled our sleeping bags and set them next to a space heater. The small, portable machine made a soft whirring sound. Surprising that it still worked after our dip in the water.

Did you really have a space heater in your backpack all this time, Ollie? I meant to say these words out loud, but I was so tired that nothing came out.

Oliver must've still seen the question in my face. He turned to zip the door flaps shut, speaking as he moved. "When we were kids, during the time you were gone, I used to pretend I was a Boy Scout. Surviving the wilderness on my own, being prepared for anything. Old habits die hard, I guess."

He shrugged with a faint, rueful grin. I gave him a look that said he wasn't fooling me—I knew he was hurting. But Oliver was used to being the strong one. He'd made a habit of hiding his own pain. Without waiting for a response, he turned around and put his back to me. Over his shoulder he said, "We'll have to take our clothes off. We'll put them as close to the heat as possible, and hopefully they'll be dry when we wake up."

If it had been anyone else, I would've argued. Nudity made me feel vulnerable, and I refused to be vulnerable anymore. But it was Oliver. He was the one person I actually could trust. The one who could never be used against me… or use me.

Another face filled my thoughts. A beautiful face with hazel eyes, tousled brown hair, and a dusting of stubble over a lean jaw.

Oliver was still facing the other side of the tent and waiting for a response. My only answer was to step out of my frozen boots and reach for the button on my jeans. I heard Oliver let out a quiet sigh of relief. The straight line of his shoulders loosened.

Once I was completely undressed, the icy clothes resting next to the heater, I got into one of the sleeping bags. My skin hurt to touch. I was so cold that it felt like I was burning, somehow. How could I feel so numb and still be hurting at the same time?

There was nothing else to do but huddle and pray for sleep to come. The heater was already blowing most of its efforts onto me, and the rest was dedicated to our clothes. I burrowed deeper into the sleeping bag, pulling it over my head at the same time.

While I'd been wallowing in my misery, Oliver had gotten into his sleeping bag, as well. Behind me, I heard the undeniable sounds of him removing his pants. He shifted, putting them near my icy clothing, then did the same with his boxer briefs. Another zipper came down, this one belonging to his sleeping bag. I frowned. Was he going outside? He hadn't put his clothes back on, though.

It wasn't until he started unzipping *my* sleeping bag that I finally turned my head. Oliver hadn't gotten up, after all, and had instead moved us closer to each other, our sleeping bags now overlapping.

"Wh-what are you d-doing?" I asked through chattering teeth.

He put his hands on my bare waist and pulled me against him. I was so startled that I jumped, which he ignored. "Lending you my body warmth. Nothing more than that," Oliver said firmly.

My first instinct was to stiffen. To move away. Then Oliver's scent surrounded me, more familiar than home. Slowly, I untwisted myself and sank back down. I was still shivering, even within the circle of his arms, but already I could feel Oliver's warmth seeping into my body.

It thawed my mind first. After a few minutes, thoughts and theories moved like a river, rushing and churning. "The m-memory," I said suddenly, opening my eyes. "It was a g-g-game Damon and I used to play. Except, f-for me, it turned r-real. That's when I started having bad dreams. The s-same dreams I was having the night my parents were k-killed."

Talking about that night brought some of the images back, and I was too weak, too cold to push them away. Maybe if I'd been awake, instead of in the grips of a nightmare, I would have realized what was happening before it was too late. There might have been time to call the police or run to Fred and Emma's.

"There's nothing you could have done, Fortuna. You were a child," Oliver said. How did he know what I was thinking?

Because my guard was down, I thought, answering my own question. The way it always came down around him, and always would. Oliver had probably heard the guilt clinging to every word.

Another quake went through me. I was slightly warmer now, but my body still shook with cold and pain. When he felt the tremor, Oliver moved his legs and tangled them with mine. Now there wasn't a single part of him that wasn't fused to me, including his cock. Even in its current state, it wasn't small.

Awareness prickled through me.

"Why were the ceti here?" I blurted, staring into the burnt glow of the space heater. "Not just in the dreamscape, but right where a memory happened to be hidden?"

The subject change wasn't subtle. I waited for Oliver to press me. He was silent for a moment, his body still curved around mine. Then he said, "We already knew the dreamscape was changing. It's a more dangerous place now."

The theory didn't feel quite right. I felt like I was missing something, a piece of key information. But I couldn't think clearly, not while I resembled a block of ice more than a person. Banishing incessant thoughts about the ceti, and the memory we'd just witnessed, I tucked my frozen fingers in the curve between my jaw and throat. I imagined a stone cottage perched on a golden hill. Gradually, my shivering subsided.

I was half-asleep when I nestled backward, wanting to get closer to Oliver's warmth. My eyes shot open when I felt something poke at the most sensitive part of me.

Oliver's erection was so hard that the length of it was firmly tucked between my legs, the tip brushing against my clitoris. A breath hitched in my throat. Oliver cursed, his voice low and irritated, and he quickly faced the other way. After a moment, he sat up, drawing his legs up against him. He rubbed the back of his head in obvious embarrassment.

Not too long ago, I might have reached around and wrapped my fingers around his length. But… I'd just slept with Laurie. Even now, in the real world, the Seelie Prince slept naked beside me, our bodies cooling from the vigor of our lovemaking. We weren't exclusive or committed, by any means, but I'd just started enjoying sex. Taking on multiple partners at once, even if one wasn't exactly rooted in reality, felt like too much right now.

"I'm sorry," Oliver said, turning his head so I could hear him.

"I'm okay," I told him. It was the truth. I patted the empty spot in the sleeping bag. "Come back. I'll sleep better with you next to me."

Still looking frustrated with himself, Oliver laid down. I tugged his arm back over my waist, careful not to bump against him with my backside. Just having him nearby helped warm my frozen skin. Oliver relented, and the stiffness left his muscles.

Quiet swelled in the darkness. Outside our small tent, the wind howled. It occurred to me that something else could be out there and spot the glow of the space heater. I stared at the wall of the tent as if I could see through it. If there were creatures in the water, it stood to reason there were probably some on land. Hunting. Hungry.

“Go to sleep,” Oliver murmured in my ear, probably feeling the tension in me. “I’ll keep watch.”

He gave me a comforting squeeze, and I felt his fingertips against my bare stomach. With a start, I looked down and realized that I’d turned my hand over, folding my fingers in the spaces between his. Emotion lodged in the place where words usually formed, and I could only nod in response. Oliver shifted. A moment later I felt his arm move, and he put it beneath my head.

An involuntary sigh left me. The hum of the heater, the faded glow, the body heat and blankets—it felt like we were in our cottage again. Back where everything was familiar and safe. My eyelids fluttered once. Twice. The third time, they stayed shut. The imprint of the space heater lingered for a second or two, then darkness. Lovely, peaceful darkness.

As I waited to drift into nothingness, those words replayed in my head, spoken in the voice of my younger self.

Monster, monster, come out to play. Monster, monster, I’ve been waiting all day.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Laurie's scent was all around me as I opened my eyes to darkness. The fire had burned down to embers, and there was no other light in the room. I shivered as I noticed how much the temperature had dropped. Now that I was a Nightmare again, the cold shouldn't have bothered me so much. I had a feeling it was more psychological than physical.

It was becoming difficult, pulling my mind out of the dreamscape every time I woke up. This was the real world, I reminded myself. So why did it feel like part of me had stayed in that small tent with Oliver? Restless, I shifted onto my side and stared at Laurie, but it was too dim to see the details of his sleeping face. Even his breathing was silent.

Wishing I could go for a run, I left the bed and crossed the room. Air whispered over my bare skin. Shivering, I knelt in front of the hearth and eyed the faded glow at its center. After a moment, I cast around for any objects or tools I could use. There was a set of pokers hanging on an iron rack. With silent, delicate movements, I removed one and used it to stoke the embers.

I wasn't sure what made me turn—maybe it was that sense of being watched. When I saw Laurie's eyes were open, his face turned toward me, I wasn't surprised. His hair, the color of a moonrock, was all raked to one side and lent it that casually tousled look.

"Did I wake you?" I asked quietly. It didn't make sense that I was trying to be quiet now, after I'd just filled the tunnels with my cries, but it was habit. At home, there was always someone sleeping in another room. A reason to keep our voices hushed.

Yet another pang of homesickness resounded through me, then, and I tried to distract myself by putting the poker back.

“I’m a light sleeper,” was all Laurie said.

That fit, I thought. It made sense that he only ever hovered at the edge of sleep, instead of submerging. Collith was the dreamer, and Laurie was the schemer.

“Come back to bed,” he said suddenly. The words weren’t a command, and there was no note of persuasion in that silken voice. It was a promise, I thought as I stood, the newly-revived firelight flickering around my naked body. I knew that if I got back into that bed, more awaited me. More Laurie, more fucking, more complications.

I walked toward him without hesitation.

The instant I rested my knee on the edge of the mattress, Laurie wrapped his fingers around my wrist and pulled me down. Curious to see what he would do, I twisted and landed on my back.

In a single, graceful movement, Laurie settled on the lower half of my body. His eyelashes cast shadows on his cheeks as he focused downward. He kneaded my thighs with his fingers, displaying that strength I kept forgetting about. The strength I suspected that I’d never forget again. Then, slowly, he bent and kissed his way down one inner thigh, caressing my skin with brief nips and sucks. I felt his tongue, too, the tip teasing that most sensitive part of me. I gasped, opening my legs wider in an instinctive movement, but then Laurie was gone. He started making his way back up the other side, doing the same things with his lips and tongue.

My core ached, and at some point, I’d bitten my wrist to stop myself from begging. At the apex of my thighs, Laurie stopped and raised his head. Our gazes met, and he smirked, his eyes gleaming. Seeing that, I realized he was doing this on purpose. Torturing me. Making me frantic for more.

Oh, you bastard, I thought with another rush of arousal. I’d forgotten about Laurie’s wicked streak. The part of him that could never resist stirring the pot or causing a bit of chaos. I should’ve expected it would apply to the bedroom, as well.

We stared at each other for another beat. My breathing was slightly uneven. Then, still keeping his eyes on mine, Laurie lowered his face. His tongue dragged up my clit, exploring it, learning me. I let out a long,

breathy moan, my palms flattened on either side of me, as if I were bracing myself.

I still wasn't prepared for it when Laurie's mouth closed around my clitoris and gave it a hard suck. Within seconds, I was desperate to come, wanting to buck my hips into Laurie's beautiful face, but his hands pressed firmly against my hip bones and urged me to wait, to savor, to fully experience the moment as he was.

Holy shit, this faerie knew what he was doing.

For minutes, or maybe hours—time lost meaning in the blissful haze of Laurie's administrations—he brought me to the edge of orgasm, only to coax me back downward, teasing. Then he yanked me back to that precipice. Sounds tore from my throat, mindless and pleading. I held onto the sheets as if I were falling… and then I was.

It was the most shattering climax I'd ever had.

I couldn't form thoughts or words. There was only sensation. Waves of pleasure. Heat and light. Once it finally came to an end, I opened my eyes, dazed, and saw that Laurie was sitting upright now, expertly rolling a condom onto his erection. He picked up my legs and propped them against his hips, then cocked his head at me and went utterly still. He was waiting for a signal, I realized. An indication that I wanted this.

Giving Laurie a contented smile, I reached up and ran my hand down the length of his hard stomach.

That small movement was all he needed.

I was so wet that his cock slid inside me effortlessly. I gasped at the size of him, and Laurie let out the quietest of sighs, as if he were overcome by it, too. A second later, he pulled out and slammed back in, causing the feeling to erupt all over again. And again. And again. With every thrust, my head thudded against the headboard. For some reason, I liked it. I liked the roughness and the urgency. There was a hard edge to Laurie's lovemaking. No, not lovemaking, I thought dimly. This was pure, delicious fucking.

Without warning, Laurie pulled out and his cock fell away. I was about to protest when he grabbed my hips and flipped me over so I was on my knees. "Not done with you yet," he breathed.

I arched my back instinctively, opening myself to him, and his growl rumbled through me before Laurie drove himself back inside. I buried my face in the pillow to smother a cry. In this position, it felt like his cock was

touching the most sensitive part of my entire body. A familiar sensation prickled through my lower stomach.

Then Laurie tugged me upright, shifting us so my back pressed against his sweat-dampened chest. Within seconds, he was thrusting again, one arm lodged beneath my breasts and the other on my clit. As he rocked back, then in again, his capable fingers touched and coaxed. I was lost in sensation—my head tipped back and rested on his shoulder. I met Laurie thrust for thrust as he added a third finger. This time, there was no pillow to hold back my cries. They shattered the air, again and again, making our sex feel even more urgent and erotic. Then, with his middle finger, Laurie began to stroke, long and deep, hitting just the right spot.

I tipped over the edge again, and the exhale that left me was completely involuntary. In the midst of the crashing waves, I heard Laurie coming, too. His hips pressed against my ass and stayed there, his body jerking.

We returned to Earth together. I became aware of my breathing first, then Laurie's, the air leaving our lungs hard and fast. Slowly, he eased out of me and released his iron grip. I sank to my knees as if I had turned into liquid.

While Laurie took off his condom and left the bed, presumably in search of a waste basket, I lowered myself back onto my stomach, feeling drowsy and serene. My eyes fluttered shut. The mattress dipped as Laurie rejoined me. His scent floated past an instant before he began tracing sinuous patterns across my back, sparks trailing in the wake of his fingers.

"Lyari stopped by earlier, but you were asleep," he murmured.

My eyes snapped open, and the happy glow around my mind started to fade. "Shit. I do need to talk to her. There should be plenty of time for that, right? Since we're not exactly leaving today."

Actually, what *was* the plan? Did Laurie think I would stay at the Unseelie Court indefinitely? I sat up and angled my body toward him, frowning in thought. Even if I were willing to hide forever, which I wasn't, I ached to see my family. The last interaction I'd had with any of them was during the scrying spell, when Belanor's drugs were ravaging my body and making everything a blur.

I raised my gaze to Laurie's, on the verge of asking all the questions hovering on my tongue. "It is strange, being with me here?" he asked suddenly.

At first, I frowned with miscomprehension. Understanding struck me a moment later. *Here* meant at the Unseelie Court, where so many of my chapters with Collith had been written. And there we were, two of his exes, laying naked in sheets still rumpled from what we'd done on them.

"No," I said, looking around the room as if seeing it for the first time. Whoever chose the decorations had either been from India or inspired by the culture, because there were marks of it everywhere. Madhubani art, dhokra lamps, and pots made of terracotta. A *toran* hung over the door.

Finished with my perusal of the space, I refocused on Laurie. "Have you been to India?"

I wasn't sure why I let myself ask the question—this wasn't a date, and there were way more important topics to cover. But Laurie didn't react, anyway.

At some point, while studying our surroundings, I'd shifted onto my side. The bedsheet was draped over my hips, but the rest of me was still naked. Laurie didn't bother to hide the fact that he was staring. Instead, he took his time, his gaze starting at my stomach, then making its way upward. The intensity in his eyes reignited that heat inside me, but I was still sore from our last round.

"That's not going to work," I said. The small hitch in my voice betrayed me. I cleared my throat and continued, "You knew I was going to ask eventually. What's the plan to get us out of this? Because I'd rather face Belanor's entire inner circle than spend one more night here."

Before I could deter him, Laurie slid his hands under my body, rolled me under him, and pressed his pulsing erection into the space between my legs. *See what you do to me?* that thrust said.

I realized I was smiling. "You didn't answer me," I reminded him.

"Sorry, what was the question?" He shook his head. "India, right. Yes, I've been there many times. It's... hot."

He'd gotten distracted again. I laughed, tipping my head back to rest against the bed. I felt my long hair drape off the edge. "How shocking. And that wasn't the question I was talking about, Laurelis Dondarte. Stop dodging."

"Very well. If I must." Laurie looked at me as if he were memorizing every detail, every moment. "I have a confession to make, Fortuna."

His tone, along with his use of my name, made my smile fade. I searched his eyes. "Okay."

Laurie didn't take a breath, but the pause he took felt like one. He pressed a kiss to my stomach and rested his cheek against it. Then the faerie lifted his head and said, "I didn't bring you to the Unseelie Court entirely because it was the only option."

"Then why…" I trailed off as realization hit me. *Of course*, I thought. Why else would Laurie be drawn here? What else did Laurie care about, besides me and his inner circle? I sat up slowly, sliding my body out from his. He instantly leaned away, giving me the space I wanted. "You want to save Collith."

All this time, I hadn't let myself say his name again, though it always hovered at the back of my mind like a ghost in an old, creaky house. Even as I fucked his ex. Even as I smiled. Even as I laughed.

"We're the only family he has left, Fortuna."

Though Laurie kept his voice low, it felt like he'd shouted the words at me. I pulled out of my freefall with a mental snap, already shaking my head. "No. No fucking way. He can rot down there, for all I care."

Laurie shifted so he sat facing me, his arm resting atop one bent knee. He studied my expression, and when he spoke again, his voice was unexpectedly soft. "They're torturing him, Fortuna."

Good. I opened my mouth to say it out loud, but something stopped me. I pursed my lips and shook my head again.

Laurie smiled. There was nothing light-hearted or sympathetic about that smile, and I couldn't ignore the sense that *I'd* disappointed *him*, somehow. The thought felt like a splinter in my finger. Annoying. Relentless. Out of all the terrible choices I'd made, this was the one he was actually going to judge me for? *Laurie?*

"What's that saying? She has fire in her soul and spite in her heart?" he murmured. I flinched as if he'd struck me, and suddenly I didn't want to be naked anymore.

"I think the verse is '*grace* in her heart.' But you're funny. No, really, I'll be laughing the entire way home. See you around, Laurie." I tossed the sheet aside and swung my legs to the floor, ignoring the chill that raced over my bare skin.

"It's not just about the torture. Do you know what happens to a faerie without a Court?" he demanded, remaining where he was.

"Do you know what happens when you piss off a Nightmare?" I snarled back, patting the floor in search of my nightgown. Nightmares might have

better eyesight than the average human, but when a room didn't have windows, we lost whatever advantage we had.

Laurie ignored this. His voice penetrated the thin nightgown as I yanked it over my head. "Collith's bond with them was broken when he died. He should've had the Tongue redo the spell the same morning he was resurrected, but he didn't. Every day he spends down in that cell is a day he loses more of himself. You know how goblins are made, yes? He's been punished enough, Fortuna. Not only did he surrender during the coup, when he could've obliterated every living thing in that room, but he didn't run, either. He stayed and let them seize him. He's trying to atone for his wrongs, and he's killing himself in the process. Do you truly think Collith deserves to die?"

I stood in the middle of the room, staring at Laurie without really seeing him. I was thinking of Naevys now. Remembering the plea she'd made just before she died. *Have faith in him.*

No. I started toward the door. I didn't know where I was going, only that I had to leave.

"He forgave you for those ninety years in Hell," Laurie said into the darkness.

I faltered for a moment. A storm raged in my heart. Forgiveness? Collith? *No*, I thought again. I took a shuddering breath that I hoped the faerie in the bed wouldn't hear, and then reached for the doorknob.

A gust of air stirred my hair. Laurie flattened his hands on either side of me, trapping me against the door. I felt his bare thigh against my fist, making me realize he was still naked. "Okay, fine," he purred in my ear. "You have a taste for bargains. What if we make it interesting?"

I faced him. Laurie leaned away slightly, giving me enough room to turn, but not much more than that. His chest pressed against mine as I raised my gaze. He probably expected a light response, to settle into our usual back-and-forth, but I glared at him through a sheen of tears. "He used me. He lied to me. He—"

"Did you forget who you're talking to?" Laurie countered. "By now, you probably know the real story behind Collith's scar. I was so in love with him that I couldn't see straight. Then, the first and only time we fucked, I felt him take it. My power. He didn't get all of it—only a little piece, really—but I felt just how you do now. I was so blinded by fury that

I tried to cut his face open. When that didn't make me feel better, I gave Sylvyre the spell that went on to kill Naevys."

"And you still didn't bother telling me the truth?" I shoved at him. "You *knew* all this time, Laurie! You had a thousand opportunities to prevent what happened to you from happening to someone else. Not only that, but I told you about the crossroads. I showed you how much it meant… how much I…"

Laurie's eyes were like frozen metal. "I didn't divulge Collith's true ability because I saw an opportunity. A way to test my theory."

"A *test*?" I echoed, my temper flaring again.

"Yes, but not for you. It was for him. I wanted to see if he would tell you the truth before he bedded you. Because if he truly didn't know what he was capable of, as he claims, it would mean that all of this was for nothing. Cutting his face, giving Sylvyre the spell that he used on Naevys, losing…" Laurie stopped.

I was rigid with rage. Behind us, the fire died again, its weak light giving way to shadows and flickers. "I assume he failed your little test, then? Since he didn't tell me?"

"Yes. Yes, he failed."

"Well, I hope it was worth it." My voice was soft. Haunted. As quickly as the fire had gone out, so had my fury. A frustrated, helpless sort of sorrow had taken its place. Maybe if Laurie had told me the truth about Collith sooner, I wouldn't have killed all those people in the black market. I wouldn't have helped Viessa take the throne. I wouldn't have gone to Cyrus and asked him to burn my pain away.

No. Dad had taught me better than this. Those were my choices, my mistakes, and I alone owned them.

Faeries still fucking sucked, though. As a general rule.

Laurie hadn't moved or spoken. He knew, damn him. He knew I was going to help. I was responsible for Collith's current circumstances, and however much he deserved it, I couldn't leave him here. The guilt would eat me alive.

"What's our play, then?" I asked, trying not to sigh. Defeat felt like a weight on my shoulders. I was too tired to be angry at Laurie. What was one more betrayal? I shouldn't have expected any less from a faerie king.

To keep thoughts like this at bay, I focused on the task ahead. It was probably mid-morning, which meant the passages would be full of fae.

Courtiers, Guardians, servants, and all the rest of the teeming, underground Court. As a stranger here, I'd thought this place was so still and eerie. It was still those things, but now that I had been connected to every single one of its inhabitants, I knew the patterns and the sounds. But there were still monsters, and there were still a lot of ways to get killed.

Rescuing Collith was one of them.

I waited to hear Laurie's brilliant plan, but he didn't answer. Instead, he looked down at me with a faint frown creasing the edges of his mouth. Silence, coming from him, was almost as unnerving as meeting the Rat King. I realized Laurie must've seen something in my face, or maybe heard it in my voice, that revealed the ache inside my chest.

"You're right," he said, making me blink. "I made a choice that was selfish. Cruel, even. I think I'd do things differently if I could. But Collith has been an unanswered question for decades, and I seized the chance to finally get one."

I stared at him. "You *think* you'd do things differently? You *think*? God, you're such an asshole."

"He certainly is. So am I. Do you want an apology or do you want to get something out of it?"

This was usually the part where I rolled my eyes and agreed. But this time I said nothing, did nothing—the ache had gotten too sharp. A muscle ticked in Laurie's jaw, and it was one of the few moments he'd allowed me to see beneath the mask.

"Fortuna. I *know* I would do things differently, all right?" he said, uncharacteristically solemn.

It wasn't okay. But it was inevitable that I helped him, and I needed to regain control of myself, anyway. I owed Laurie a debt after what he'd done at the tomb, and I could forget about personal vendettas when there was a chance to cross out a line in my ledger.

While I'd been thinking, Laurie had drawn close again. His bare chest brushed against my nipples through the nightgown, and he bent his head next to mine. "I'm sorry," he said in my ear.

The feel of his breath made my core tighten—I remembered how that breath had felt between my open legs. As if I could run from the feeling, I ducked beneath Laurie's arm and stalked across the room. There was nowhere to go other than the bed. *Too dangerous.* I stopped in front of the

fire and put my hands over the heat. The desire building inside me didn't fade.

Without looking away from the pile of charred wood and ash I asked, "Why are you so certain that Collith was lying to you? He was younger then. He wasn't even king. Maybe he really didn't know."

Laurie remained by the door, and once again, the pitch black hid most of his features. I couldn't see his expression as he said, "He's a faerie, my queen. Lying is what we do best."

When he said that, I reconsidered holding a grudge against him. It was the least of what he deserved. Moments like this reminded me how different we were. Maybe too different, even for friendship. Those differences were what had led Laurie to kill Ian O'Connell, which I still hadn't forgotten about. I'd just… set the knowledge aside, because that was easier than distancing myself from him.

I could hate Laurie for what he'd done, or what he'd chosen *not* to do. But hate felt like a winged shadow inside me, growing bigger every time I gave myself to the darkness. I hugged myself and frowned down at the pulsing embers.

Without the fog of anger clinging to me, I could see certain things more clearly now. Laurie had known this conversation was coming—that was why he'd dodged so many of my questions. Why he'd looked at me, my naked body, in a way that seemed wistful or resigned. He knew he'd have to tell the truth of his own shitty choices and deceptions, and once I found out, I probably wouldn't let him touch me again.

So many lies and half-truths. Had we finally reached the end of them? Or was this how it would be for as long as I allowed these males to be in my life?

"How many years were you king, Laurie?" I asked without preamble, turning my head. "And before that, you were a prince, right? That must really fuck with someone."

Laurie stepped out of the gloom and stopped near the fire, but he left a wide space between us. The dying light moved in his bright eyes. "How so?" he said finally.

I thought of how I felt every time someone gaped at me, or sought my company, knowing it was because of the perfect face they saw. "It makes love impossible. There's always a part of you, no matter how good they

make you feel, that wonders if it's real. Or if they're just another person using you, wanting you for all the wrong reasons."

Laurie's voice was dry as he said, "I'm hardly lacking in confidence, you adorable creature. But I appreciate the effort to psychoanalyze me."

He was right. I *was* trying to understand, but it wasn't just about him. I wanted to understand Collith, too. To make excuses for why they'd both become like this.

I was looking for reasons to forgive them.

Shying away from the thought, I reached for a blanket draped over a nearby armchair. I wrapped it around myself and cleared my throat. "The bargain you mentioned. What did you have in mind?"

"If you help me get Collith out, I will grant you a boon," Laurie answered.

He really didn't know that I'd already decided to help him. He was right about one thing—I might as well get something out of this. A boon from Laurie could come in handy later, and I had a family to protect. "Fine," I snapped. "You can tell me the plan after I've had breakfast. Maybe another bath, too."

Leave, my tone said. But Laurie fingered the edge of my blanket and didn't move. I was about to look at him when I remembered that he was naked, so his words fell upon the side of my neck as he said, "I can help you bathe."

I said nothing. After a moment, I felt a tug at the blanket, and it slipped from my grasp. It fell into a pool of wool at my feet. Still, I didn't speak. Laurie reached for the bottom of my nightgown. I thought of every reason why I should tell him to go, and it was a long list. He pulled the nightgown over my head. Pressed his wicked mouth against my bare shoulder.

One more time, I told myself, my eyes sliding shut. *Just one more.*

That turned out to be a lie, too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Hours later, Laurie finally left the warm bed we'd been sharing.

I propped my head on my hand and watched him dress. He pulled everything on with swift, careless movements. A few feet away, the bathtub rested in front of a crackling fire. We'd spent so much time in the water that my fingertips had begun to wrinkle. At some point, we ended up back in bed, where we had remained ever since. Now it was early afternoon and I still hadn't put any clothes on. Secretly, I was concerned I'd lost the ability to walk.

"Loath as I am to leave you, I should sift back to Court and find out Belanor's next move," Laurie said, turning to kiss me. "I'll be back in time for the jailbreak, as you call it."

My lips tingled from the brief pressure of his, but the mention of tonight's plan—the details of which Laurie still hadn't shared with me—made my mood darken. Before I could tell him that I'd changed my mind and Collith could stay in his cell for the rest of eternity, Laurie sifted out of sight.

The moment I realized he was gone, I wiped the scowl from my face and got out of the massive bed. I'd been meaning to summon Lyari all day, and warn her about what was coming. Since I had nothing else to wear, I put the nightgown back on. I still felt exposed, though, and my eyes scanned the floor. *Damn it, Laurie, where did you put my underwear?*

Someone knocked on the door. Thinking of all the people who wanted me dead, I searched for the sword as I called, "Who is it?"

"Oh, good. You're awake," the reply came.

I frowned at the sound of that voice. Forgetting the sword, I hurried toward the door. It swung open at the same moment I reached for the knob, and I stepped back to avoid getting struck. A moment later, the Unseelie Queen swept past me, leaving a trail of frost on the dirt floor. She wore a gown made of thick wool, the sleeves so long they nearly dragged along the floor. A belt accentuated her narrow waist. In one hand, the stems held delicately between her fingers, she carried two wine glasses. In the other, she gripped a bottle of red wine.

I closed the door on her Guardians and spun back around. Viessa stopped in the center of the room and faced me with raised brows. “Goodness, you’ve been busy in here. Prince Laurelis must be as impressive as the rumors claim.”

An automatic denial rose up, but the words wouldn’t come out. Not when I could still feel the imprint of Laurie’s mouth on me. Viessa’s lips curved into a slow smile, and it felt as if she could see the fire, see the way his touch still lingered.

“Why are you here, Your Majesty?” I asked instead. My face was hot.

“Honestly, I had to get away from Nuvian. He likes to cuddle.” The faerie shuddered and turned away.

I was so grateful she’d allowed me to change the subject that it took an extra second for her answer to register. “Wait. Cuddle?” I echoed.

Viessa ignored the presence of the bathtub. As she set the wine glasses down on a small table between the two armchairs, she saw my confusion. Her eyebrows went up again. “You didn’t know he’s my lover?”

“But… isn’t he your…”

She yanked the cork from the wine bottle. Viessa began to pour with one hand while she waved the other in a gesture of dismissal. “Haven’t you read the bible, Fortuna? Siblings and cousins fucked all the time. Or, better yet, read *Game of Thrones*. That’ll be less painful than the Old Testament. We need some snacks, I think.”

Acting as though she hadn’t just revealed something utterly revolting, Viessa went to the rope in the corner and pulled on its frayed end. She returned to the chairs, and once she’d adjusted her heavy skirts, Viessa sank into one of them. She took a sip of wine. Then, as if the strength had gone out of her, she rested the glass in her lap and closed her eyes. “God, I’m tired,” she muttered.

Wondering if this was a trick, somehow, I lowered myself into the other chair. It creaked beneath my weight. “Being queen not everything you thought it would be?”

She let out a sigh that made her seem far too human. “There’s been more… resistance than I anticipated,” Viessa replied. “Since I didn’t undergo the trials, and there’s still a living Sylvyre, some of the bloodlines aren’t afraid to be vocal about it. No one seems to give a flying fuck that the Folduins were supposed to have the throne years ago.”

“Faeries don’t like being told what to do, and they don’t like change. You did both. Take it from someone who was in your shoes. How many assassination attempts have there been?” I added, finally reaching for the second glass of wine.

Viessa smirked. “Four. I’ve started an ice sculpture garden.”

That was a garden I never wanted to see. Falling silent, I followed the queen’s gaze to the flames in front of us. The blue depths made me think of Collith and his lightning bolts.

My voice was quiet. “What do you plan to do with him?”

“Do you care?” Viessa countered, turning her head. She didn’t bother to ask who I was talking about. I looked back at her and waited. Taking pity on me, she lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “He will remain here, in the dungeons. On that, my allies and I can actually agree. Now, I simply *must* know what you did to the Tongue to make him piss himself every time he sees you!”

The question made me go still. I took a drink of wine to buy myself time, and its herbal notes slid over my tongue. Viessa was either pretending ignorance or she really didn’t know about my last conversation with the Tongue, or Gorwin, as I’d learned he was once called. *Run, little mouse. Run before I change my mind*, I had said to him.

He’d almost pissed his pants.

Deciding to play along, I made a bitter sound. I didn’t want to reveal that I knew the Tongue was her man—it could be useful to me later. This was the Unseelie Court, where the game never ended, no matter how friendly the opposition seemed or whether I considered myself retired. “Perk of being a Nightmare,” was all I said.

Making a vague sound, Viessa got to her feet. I heard her wine glass clink as she put it down.

“You do have beautiful hair,” the queen murmured, almost to herself. Her touch was unexpectedly gentle as she spread the strands out over my shoulders. Next, she divided them into sections and started to weave a braid. *Okay, this is getting weird,* I thought, gripping my glass tighter. But I was curious about Viessa’s endgame, so I didn’t shift out of her reach.

“Why did you help me take the crown from Collith?” she asked suddenly.

I hesitated, my mind racing. What was her angle? How did the answer benefit her? No matter how I looked at it, though, I couldn’t see a strategy. After a moment, I found myself actually thinking about the question. My jaw clenched. “Because… I wanted to cause him pain,” I admitted.

Already finished with my braid, Viessa picked her wine back up and returned to the chair she’d been sitting in. She looked thoughtful.

Before I could ask a question of my own, the door opened again. Several of Viessa’s employees came in. Four of them lifted the bathtub and carried it out. The other two, both human, set a charcuterie board on the table between us—my mouth watered at the sight of all the cheeses, meats, and fruits. The mortals bowed and walked backward, leaving as silently as they’d come.

Once we were alone again, Viessa turned to me.

“I’m going to give you some advice now,” she said decisively. “Normally I don’t like to bother with such things, but we’re bound, you and I. Watching you make the same mistake I did would give me no pleasure.”

“What mistake?”

The queen took another drink, then met my gaze. “Believing what you feel to be hate instead of love.”

“I don’t care about Collith Sylvyre,” I said instantly. Even now, I couldn’t bring myself to say that word out loud. *Love*. It was too big. Too heavy. I put my wine down, as if it represented all the feelings I didn’t want to face.

Viessa’s voice softened. “I did. Regret is a wasteful emotion, but it visits me whenever I think of him. For your sake, I hope what you say is true.”

It felt like she could see through the hard mask I’d put on, through my skin, and into my mind. It must’ve been a faerie thing, their ability to make me feel young and transparent. Unable to keep looking into Viessa’s

knowing eyes, I fixed my attention on the charcuterie board. I reached for a grape and asked, “When did you find out about his… ability? Before or after?”

“Before. But I didn’t have this at the time.” She held up her hand, and icicles extended from the tips of her fingers. “There was no power for him to take.”

I chewed on a piece of cheese. As I stared at the glint of firelight on those bits of ice, like fireworks reflecting off glass, I remembered what Collith had once told me about a faerie’s power. *Usually the ability manifests during puberty, but in rare cases, it can arise through trauma*. It was the cell, I thought. The dungeon cell that Viessa had spent so many years in. In spite of all her schemes and political machinations, she’d almost broken from the dark. The isolation. The cold. I’d only been down there for a few hours, if that, and I had felt myself fracturing. It spoke to Viessa’s strength that she had emerged with a crown on her head.

Suddenly I was desperate for her to go on, frantic to know more about Collith’s lie. The lie that had hit our relationship like a grenade and reduced it to ash. When Viessa seemed content to just drink wine, I fidgeted, plucking at the strings lining one of the throw pillows.

“How does that work, exactly?” I blurted, my gaze darting back to hers. “Does he ‘take’ his partner’s power whenever there’s penetration?”

Viessa swirled her wine. Her tone was airy, and maybe a little bored as she answered, “He doesn’t drain power from his partner every time he fucks, no. I suppose my wording could’ve been slightly misleading in that regard. It only happens the first time.”

My eyes went back to the flames. To the shimmers of blue. I wondered if I’d ever be able to look at fire again without thinking of Collith. “How did you let him go?” I heard myself ask.

“Love never fades, darling. It only changes.” Viessa lifted the bottle of wine and poured more into her glass. She gulped some down before adding, “What of Prince Laurelis? Does he have a chance?”

“Laurie and I are friends. That’s all,” I insisted. It had the taste of another lie.

Viessa smiled, but there was something in the curve of her ruby lips that said she didn’t believe me. “There’s no need to choose, you know. At the Unseelie Court, we fuck who we want and leave shame for the humans.”

I reached for my wine glass again, suppressing a smile of my own. “You remind me of Gwyn. She’s always preaching about letting go of my… inhibitions.”

Viessa lifted her head, wearing an incredulous expression. “Gwyn? The huntress? I’m not sure if that’s an insult or a compliment.”

But I was silent; I was too startled to respond. I hadn’t told anyone else about those parts of my conversations with Gwyn. The fact that I was confiding in Viessa, of all people, made me wonder if there was something in the wine she’d brought. “A compliment, I think,” I said eventually. “You’re much less… murdery than she is, though.”

“Did you just describe Gwyn of the Wild Hunt as ‘murdery?’” She laughed. “I like you, Lady Sworn. I figured I would, once I’d had a hot bath and some decent sleep. But now I know for certain.”

Surprise floated through my chest when I realized I was laughing, too. How strong was this wine? I’d forgotten what it was like, just talking with someone. Allowing myself to be instead of forcing myself to become.

Still smiling, I rested my head against the wing of the armchair. “Did you grow up here at Court?” I asked.

Quick as that, Viessa’s mirth faded. “Yes,” she said curtly.

Her tone made me blink, and I straightened. Maybe she thought I was trying to obtain more information for my own gain. Viessa was a faerie, after all, and one who was so good at the game that she’d maneuvered her way to a throne.

I was about to backtrack when she added, “I grew up here, but I was never a child. Sylvyre had… specific tastes, and he began visiting me at night since before I can remember.”

Visiting her at night? I thought blankly. Painful as it was to accept, there was no mistaking her meaning. I’d known Sylvyre was cruel and power-hungry, but I hadn’t known he was evil. Sympathy filled my throat, making my words sound tight as I asked, “Your parents never found out?”

“Oh, they knew.” Viessa tilted her glass closer to her face, frowning. She pressed a fingertip against her cheek and stared at it for a moment. The fire made a popping sound. After another moment, she blew on whatever rested on her fingertip and watched it go into the flames. An eyelash, if I had to guess.

“Over the years, I tried to kill him on a dozen occasions,” she continued, startling me. “But every time, without fail, I faltered. Sylvyre

had made sure I was terrified of him, you see. So I decided to get someone else to do it. I knew Nuvian wouldn't because he was fond of His Majesty —the old bastard had only ever been kind to my brother. Eventually I set my sights on Collith. Back then, he was not the male you know now. He was eager to be the shining knight. When the king put that spell on Naevys, Collith actually went through with it. I was happy to see the king die." Bitterness leaked into Viessa's voice. Apparently there were wounds even time couldn't heal. "You know the rest, of course. I tried to kill Collith and botched the job."

Firelight flickered over the pain she couldn't hide, and her knuckles were white from the grip she had on the wine glass. "I'm sorry Sylvyre did that to you, Viessa," I said softly.

Viessa seemed to shake herself; she twisted in the chair and met my gaze. Her tone became brisk. "I'm going to offer you something I rarely offer anyone, Fortuna."

"What is that?" I asked, trying not to sound wary.

"My friendship."

I faltered. She'd surprised me, this new queen who made wishes on eyelashes and whose heart wasn't as frozen as she would have everyone believe. But I had been tricked by too many faeries.

"That didn't work out very well for Collith, if I remember correctly," I said.

Viessa inclined her head, making her curtain of auburn hair sway. Some of the strands were encased in icicles, and they clinked like the strangest of wind chimes. "Oh, but I never offered him my friendship," she said matter-of-factly, raising those frost-tinted brows again. "Merely my fealty. Which is another beast altogether, wouldn't you agree?"

I didn't, actually. After exchanging blood with Gil, those lines were forever blurred for me. But I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth —even if Viessa was playing a game, I could benefit from this. "Okay," I said, nodding. "I accept your offer. On the condition that your first act as my friend is advice. I want to go home, Viessa. How do I make that happen?"

She didn't seem surprised. "Belanor will send spies to watch your house, if he hasn't already."

I leaned toward her in my enthusiasm."So we pay him a visit. Sometimes confronting your enemy head-on is the best way to win, right?

You taught me that."

"Only if the circumstances are right. If certain pieces have been put into place. This is not the right course of action." The faerie pushed her hair over one slender shoulder. "In war, most might say that your weapons are bullets. But if you're really well versed in the ways of war, your greatest weapon is your head."

Oliver had said something along those lines, once. I searched my memory, and his voice drifted through me. *Sometimes it's not about being stronger. It's about being smarter*.

But I hadn't been smart; I'd been making terrible decisions lately. No, not just lately—it was something I'd been doing since I was a child. Always rushing headlong into every choice, every feeling, desperate to escape the memories nipping at my heels. The night I could never forget, the event that had forever shaped me into someone else.

A sound through the wall. A cry in the hallway. A shadow under the door.

I tried to think in the way Collith and Laurie had taught me. The way I'd learned while I wore a twisted crown upon my head. The way Oliver had urged me to when all this chaos began.

What was my objective? That was easy. I wanted to be home with the people I loved. What was the obstacle? Also easy. My presence put them in danger. There had to be a way to achieve both outcomes, and usually it was obvious.

Magic. I had magic at my disposal. A force that could do anything. In the past few weeks, I had seen depths and heights of it that I'd never dreamed possible, even growing up knowing such things existed. Witches with their spells, faeries with their glamour…

Glamour.

My mind jerked to attention. *That's it*. I already had something that could do the same work as a glamour. Moving quickly now, my thoughts traveled upward. Through the ground, through the woods, and straight into a barn that smelled like new paint. They rushed into one of the bedrooms, bumping the door open like an invisible hand. Then they dove into a shiny vent that breathed warm air in the night, where an obnoxious ring was lodged in a wooden box, twinkling on a bed of cheap velvet.

Slowly I said, "What if Belanor's spies didn't see me? What if I went back wearing a different face?"

“Do you have abilities I don’t know about?” Viessa questioned.

Yes, but that was beside the point—I also had a bespelled ring. But I wasn’t about to reveal my new plan to a faerie, hair braiding notwithstanding. “No,” I said. “Just thinking out loud. I thought I was onto something.”

In response to this, Viessa unfolded her pale legs and stood. She was still holding a glass of wine as she adjusted her skirt and strode past me. “If you stay, please know that you are not a prisoner here, Lady Sworn,” she called. “I’ve studied every player in this game, and I decided long ago that you’re not one I’d want as an enemy. You may come and go by your leave; I won’t try to stop you. Enjoy your evening… and thank you for the conversation.”

With that, the Unseelie Queen closed the door behind her, leaving it encased in a glittering layer of frost.

After Viessa left, I tried to summon Lyari again. She was either sleeping or back on guard duty, because she didn’t appear.

Neither did Gil, whose side of the bond remained dim and silent. He needed to know what Laurie and I were planning, as well, but I couldn’t bring myself to wake him. If he’d managed to find a respite from his pain, I’d give him as much time as possible.

To pass the hours between now and Collith’s grand escape, I curled up in my armchair with a novel from the small bookshelf. Whoever lived in these rooms apparently did a lot of traveling—every book had a price sticker on it with the name of a different airport. In spite of the tension thrumming through my body, I found myself actually caught up in the story. I covered myself with the blanket again. The fire made its small, merry sounds. Hours ticked past, marked by the state of the logs and flames. My stomach growled, but most of the items on the charcuterie board had dried up or turned brown. Deciding to ignore it, I turned the page of the book still open in my lap.

“Well, isn’t this cozy? I expected to find you bouncing off the walls.”

I yelped at Laurie’s voice, and the book went flying from my hands. I started to glare at him, but then my gaze dropped to the paper bag he held

in one hand. There was grease staining the bottom, and the smell hit me a moment later.

“Okay, don’t let this go to your head, but you’ve never been more attractive to me,” I said fervently, bending to retrieve the book.

Laurie set the bag on the table without trying to barter or tease. This time, I recognized his silence for what it was—planning. Glancing up at him through my lashes, I thought about asking where he’d been. He wore a three-piece gray suit now, and there was a distracted look in his eyes. With Laurie, though, it would be a waste of breath. I’d never get a straight answer. In the end, I just took a container of fries out of the bag.

As I ate, Laurie leaned his forearms along the top of the other armchair. “It’s almost time. Are you ready to fetch Collith and blow this popsicle stand?” he asked.

The fry I had just shoved into my mouth suddenly lost its flavor. I swallowed it, along with a resigned sigh. Now seemed as good a time as any to bring up the questions I’d been considering all day. “You do realize that we won’t be able to stay here once we’ve freed him,” I pointed out. “Viessa and the Guardians will be after us, and then I’ll have *two* murderous monarchs on my ass. Do you have a new hiding place in mind?”

“Actually, you’ll only have one murderous monarch after you, not two,” Laurie replied cheerfully. “I created a diversion that will keep Belanor’s inner circle occupied for a week or so. Didn’t I mention it?”

We both knew he hadn’t—I also didn’t miss that Laurie had dodged the issue of where we’d go once we pulled off this daring getaway. It was why he’d dangled this new information in front of me. It was the equivalent of saying, *Oh, look, something shiny*.

“What kind of diversion?” I asked, just as he’d known I would.

Laurie lifted one shoulder in a careless shrug. His eyes traveled downward, almost lazily, taking note of the thin nightgown I still wore. “I may have called in my last favor and had a witch curse them with relentless diarrhea,” he answered. “That won’t stop the cherubim, but something tells me you can handle them. By the time Belanor recovers and lifts the curse off his followers, we’ll have a new plan to deal with him, I’m sure.”

He seemed so certain that Belanor would wake up. Thinking about the night ahead, I reached into the greasy bag again and pulled out a

cheeseburger. The wrapper crinkled into the stillness. I decided to revisit my first question. Maybe if I annoyed him enough, Laurie would stop dancing around it.

"And where do you expect Collith to go after we get him out?" I asked again, covering my mouth to hide the bite I'd just taken. "He can't exactly waltz back to his old room."

"Why, we'll all stay at Casa de Sworn, of course."

My stomach dropped. I held the cheeseburger tighter, hoping Laurie wouldn't notice, and made an effort to sound calm as I said, "Viessa will find him in a matter of—"

"Relax, I'm kidding. Don't get your panties in a bunch." He smirked. "Oh, wait, you can't. I still have those in my pocket."

I glared at Laurie again and thrust out my hand. "Hand it over. Now."

"Such a spoilsport." Laurie sighed and tossed a pair of underwear into my lap, which I grabbed and shoved beneath me. I didn't ask why he'd taken them in the first place, because I knew I wouldn't like any answer.

That was when I realized Laurie had managed to distract me again. *Tricky, clever faerie.* I took another bite of my burger and asked, "You know, why do you even need me? Can't you just make the guard believe the room is empty while you slip in and get Collith?"

Laurie shook his head. "It's not that simple. My sources tell me the Tongue has put a spell on Collith's cell that only allows the queen and her Guardians over the threshold. There's also the fact that even I can't be in two places at once—yes, fucking with the guard's head is part of the plan, but I need to be near him in order for the illusion to remain. Unless you take no issue with my snapping his neck?"

The guard could be one of the faeries I'd grown to like during my time as queen. "Yes, I take issue," I said tightly.

"Thought you might. Which is why I'll remain in the passageway and maintain the illusion while you go into the cell." Laurie paused. "Oh, I should mention that Collith is currently wearing chains drenched in holy water. That'll be fun for you, won't it?"

"Why do I need to be here, exactly?" a voice asked from the doorway.

Laurie raised his eyebrows at Gil. The Seelie Prince must've stopped at his room before coming here, I thought. "Because someone needs to be the lookout once I've followed Viessa and her guards down into the

dungeons. You'll be stationed near the top of the stairwell," he informed the vampire.

"Wait, if I can't get into Collith's cell, how am I supposed to free him?" I cut in. Appetite gone, I dropped the half-eaten cheeseburger back into the bag. "Not to mention getting him out of the chains? I'm a *Nightmare*, Laurie. We don't have supernatural strength."

"It's precisely because you're a Nightmare that you must be the one to free him."

I waited for him to go on. When he didn't, I pushed the bag away in a burst of frustration. "I assume you have a plan."

"Don't I always?" Laurie stopped again, but this time, I realized it wasn't him withholding answers—he was giving me a chance to retreat. Change my mind. It felt like once he told me the details of his scheme, there was no going back. I would be in this, to the death. I resisted the urge to sigh again. No matter how badly I wanted to walk out of here, I knew those words would follow me. *They're torturing him, Fortuna.*

"I'm listening," I said, pulling the blanket around me, as if the wool could shield me from whatever happened next.

Laurie didn't rub his hands together, but he may as well have; his eyes gleamed with cunning. "First, let me ask you a question. Was my spy mistaken in their report of seeing Savannah Simonson leave your room?"

I frowned, wondering where he was going with this. Gil finally entered the room and leaned against an armoire. "She didn't come in, but she did visit me, yes," I said.

"Why?"

"She wants to see Matthew. And…" I hesitated. I remembered the look on Savannah's face when I'd told her I would pass on her message. Her expression was something more than relief and gratitude; there had been hope, too. "I think she wants to be forgiven."

"So she feels beholden to you." Laurie didn't phrase it like a question.

"I guess you could view it like that." I gave him a hard look. "If you were a manipulative asshole."

My wily faerie prince just grinned. "Excellent," he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Laurie shielded us from sight as we made our way through the maze. Courtesy of Rachel, who'd been under the impression that we wanted the clothes for exercise, all of us were dressed for battle. Laurie wore what looked like tactical pants, and a tight, cowl neck sweater clung to his hard body. He'd brought the sword that Tabitha delivered to him in her dragon form, and it hung off his hip in a black leather sheath. His hair was braided back, a detail that had me darting looks at him every few seconds. I'd never seen it braided before. Gil wore a long-sleeved shirt and the same pants as Laurie, his feet protected by thick combat boots. As for myself, I was in a zip-up sweatshirt, black exercise pants, and black tennis shoes.

I longed for a Glock in my hand, but asking Rachel for one hadn't seemed prudent. She definitely would've gotten suspicious then. I'd considered asking Laurie to fetch it, but the fact that he hadn't offered seemed telling. Getting stabbed with a holy blade had really done a number on him.

The realization still bothered me, even now, as we made our way through the shadowed tunnels on a rescue mission that could go wrong in a hundred different ways. This thought had also occurred to Gil—the air was thick with his anxiety and the bond churned. Laurie led the way, keeping whatever he felt expertly hidden behind that formidable mental barrier of his. None of us attempted conversation, but that didn't mean it was silent.

Despite its change in leadership, other things about the Unseelie Court had remained the same. For instance, the sounds were still disconcerting. Behind one door there were furious whispers, arguing back and forth… but

it was only one voice, one speaker. He became more incensed with every moment, and I quickened my pace, eager to pass. Behind another door came humming. Low, off-key humming, broken now and then with a strange giggle. Behind yet another was the undeniable sounds of sex, flesh slapping against flesh. Laurie didn't smirk back at me or make a comment. This, combined with the straight line of his shoulders, gave away his own tension.

At long last, we stopped at the crack in the wall that would lead down to the dungeons. I never thought I'd be glad to see it, but the sooner we got this rescue over with, the sooner we could leave this House of Horrors.

"Remember," Laurie started, facing me.

"…only summon you if I'm dying," I finished. "Don't worry, I've got this."

"I know you do." He stepped closer and skimmed his finger along the side of my wrist. Such a small touch, and already my heart was racing. A strand of hair had come loose from his braid. I stopped myself from reaching for it, conscious of Gil's presence. Laurie had no such qualms, and his voice floated around me like a second caress. "Don't hold back, Firecracker. Show these people who you really are."

Sparing me from a response, he removed the torch from a nearby sconce and held it out. I took it automatically, and my cheeks burned as I darted a glance at Gil, wondering what he thought of our brief exchange.

The vampire looked back with a tense expression, his jaw clenched. He didn't care about Laurie—he was anxious about letting me go into the dungeons alone. I winked at Gil and switched the torch to my other hand, using my right to hit him in the arm. "Hey, I'm hard to kill, remember? You would know."

"A fact I haven't forgotten, by the way," Laurie put in, giving Gil a warm smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

Gil didn't react to the threat. He barely spared Laurie a glance, in fact, and I couldn't remember the last time someone was so unswayed by him. *I bet it's annoying the shit out of Laurie.* I had to suppress a smile at the thought.

"If something goes wrong, I'll know, and I'll come," Gil promised me.

He said it like a fact, without any of the human nuances or gestures usually accompanying words like that. I struggled to hide a frown. Would Gil be so concerned if he didn't have a spell on him? Guilt and worry

battered at my mind, and as always, my first instinct was to run from them.

"I'll see you soon," I said. Turning from Gil and Laurie, I went down the stairs without hesitation.

My breathing was loud in my ears. I reached the bottom before I was ready, and I moved the torch forward, casting light over the rows of rusted bars along one side of the narrow, seemingly endless space. I didn't see a single person, but I could hear them. Down here, the quiet was more pronounced. It was disrupted by the occasional cough or groan.

Every muscle in my body felt like a taut violin string as I tried not to think about my own time behind those bars. *The plan. Stick to the plan, Fortuna.* I took a few steps and stopped, looking left and right. Where was the guard? Why hadn't anyone come yet? Damn it, everything hinged on the Guardian. I faltered again and looked in the opposite direction. Maybe we'd arrived in the midst of a shift change…

"Well met, Lady Sworn."

The voice came from the cell closest to me, and I knew I'd heard it before. I stopped and searched for the owner, straining to make out details within the dimness. The shape of the figure sitting there was also vaguely familiar. It was one of the council members, I realized a moment later. The one with all the doctorate degrees and the kind, gray eyes. He'd always been kind to me during those wretched meetings.

"Eamon?" I stepped closer to the bars. "What happened? Why are you down here?"

The faerie didn't move, but his response came out of the dark. "I made a grave miscalculation during an interaction with our new queen, and I questioned one of her new policies during a dinner party. She had her Guardians arrest me on the spot. Treason, I believe the official reason was. Lady Yarrow committed the same sin."

Lady Yarrow was another member of the council. I was about to ask him about her fate when I heard a shuffling sound. I knew it hadn't been made by Eamon. Frowning, I took a step forward and peered into the next cell. I almost didn't recognize Lady Yarrow, who'd been wearing a pearl-encrusted gown the last time our paths crossed, her hair done up in ringlets. She didn't say anything to me, and I shifted back to Eamon's cell, chewing the skin off my lower lip as I thought.

No wonder Micah had been so wary of crossing Viessa—she'd already made an example of these two. The new queen was a paradox. One day she was employing young women and providing them with generous salaries, and the next she was throwing people into the dungeon for daring to speak against her.

She reminded me… of me.

The revelation wasn't a good one. I swallowed and refocused on Eamon's silhouette. I wanted to tell him that I'd fix this. Get him out of this mess. But I still hadn't managed to save the person I'd actually come for, and I didn't know if we'd pull this plan off, even without the added complications of trying to free two other prisoners.

I couldn't leave him like this, sitting in complete darkness. There was an empty sconce nearby, and I slid my stolen torch into the metal ring. The flame's gentle light reached into Eamon's cell. I shifted back into his line of sight, knowing I had to move on. "I'm sorry," I said, surprised that I meant it. "I'm sorry she put you in here."

Despite his circumstances, the faerie lord still addressed me as if we were facing each other across a table. I could hear his polite smile as he answered, "Fret not, Lady Sworn. Having power doesn't eliminate danger; it only increases it. I knew there were many risks when I accepted my bloodline's chair."

"I was hoping you'd come," someone said from behind.

Another voice I knew. I jumped and spun to meet Thuridan's hate-filled gaze, already cringing. Of course it would be him. Sharp glass gleamed between us, and I quickly noticed that the fae warrior had drawn his sword. I held up my hands and readied my power at the same time, greeting the Guardian in a casual drawl.

"Hey, Thuridan. Long time, no see. Hey, listen, when I kick your ass within the next ten seconds, I just want you to know this isn't personal." I paused, twisting my lips in speculation. "Wait, scratch that. It is personal—I *really* don't like you."

"When the queen extended her offer of hospitality to you, she sent word to Sylvyre's guards. Would you like to know what she told us?" He grinned, and there was nothing friendly or mischievous about Thuridan Sarwraek's smile. He looked nothing like Jassin, with that tawny hair and trimmed beard, but I still saw Jassin in the curve of Thuridan's lips. A cold sensation crept down my spine.

I was officially done talking.

But when I reached for Thuridan's deepest fears, which still might not be enough to make him fail his queen, his captain, and every one of his comrades, I was startled to find them well-fortified. *Shit.* More power, I needed more power. I eyed Thuridan's sword, wondering which of us would be quicker in a draw, if it came to that. "Okay, I'll play," I blurted. "What did Viessa tell you?"

Thuridan's eyes glittered. "She said to kill you on sight."

He only gave me a second to register what he'd said before the faerie swung his sword at me so fast that, if I'd been human, he would've hacked my body in half.

"Shit!" I leaped out of the way, letting out a yelp. Thuridan was already coming at me again. The terror was exactly the motivation I needed, and I drew my power back to strike at his defenses like a cobra. Thuridan hissed in pain, but he didn't break. At least he'd stopped swinging the sword—I kept coming at him, and if my own pulsing temples were any indication, his headache was crippling. He still hadn't dropped his weapon completely, though, and I kept my eyes on it throughout every assault.

Gil was right, I thought. Without all-consuming rage or world-shattering pain, it wasn't as easy to get past Thuridan's mental walls. Jassin must have trained him.

Well, until I had better control of my abilities, I'd have to try other tactics. Thinking quickly, I mustered the nerve to step closer to Thuridan. He was bent over, his hands braced on his knees, and I knelt beside him to speak in his ear. My lips brushed his earlobe as I breathed, "Jassin died screaming. Did you know that? Wailing like a baby. He would've begged for his life, if he'd been able to."

"You *bitch*," Thuridan snarled, straightening. His face was white with rage.

But he'd let his guard slip, and the fury I had been hoping for created a weakness in the wall. I seized my chance and rammed past it. I heard Thuridan's kneecaps hit the ground as I invaded.

Adrenaline sang in my blood. It lent me clarity and speed during my exploration. This faerie's mind was not as impressive or elaborate as Dracula's, nor as simple as others I'd encountered. It was not a cathedral, a maze, or a jumbled collection. Instead, this psyche made me think of a

castle, somehow. I was in a long hallway, the walls made of gray brick, and there were rows of doors on either side.

I'd hardly finished my initial perusal when the entire place began to shake, as if a giant were standing outside slamming his great, meaty fists against the castle walls. Dust, dirt, and bits of rock sprinkled down with every blow.

Thuridan was already fighting me. Damn, he was strong.

In the real world, I took the sword from his limp fingers. Its weight made me grimace, and I realized my time at the Seelie Court had weakened the muscles I'd spent so much time building. Adam would certainly change that, if I ever saw him again. I wrapped my other hand around Thuridan's arm, more from habit than need. My goal was to maim, not to kill.

The physical touch did seem to help—while Thuridan's assaults continued, the walls didn't seem in danger of coming down anytime soon. I resumed my hunt, beginning with the first door. Just as I'd hoped, there was a memory inside. Surprise flitted through me when I saw that Peeks was part of it.

He hadn't been exaggerating when he mentioned the bullying, although bullying seemed like a generous word for it. I stood there and watched, helpless, as Peeks and Thuridan were strung up by their ankles, surrounded by faeries that looked the same age. The same age, but certainly not the same size. Even with supernatural strength, Peeks and Thuridan never stood a chance. Their tormentors' beautiful faces were twisted into hideous smiles and taunts, and those smiles never faded as they raised crudely-carved clubs and began to beat the two friends with them.

I stepped back and closed the door, quickly moving on to the next. But… the next one was even worse.

I opened the door to find Jassin on the other side.

He stood there, smiling, as if no time at all had passed since I'd ended his life in the throne room. His long, copper hair gleamed as if there were a torch shining upon it, and he wore a form-fitting black tunic that looked like it had been made from the skin of a snake. His fingernails were just as long as I remembered, that silver ring shining.

I was frozen on the threshold, trying not to let a single sound pass my lips, because I knew one of them was a scream. A shock went through me when other figures appeared like apparitions. There was Thuridan,

standing at Jassin's side. The two of them faced a cluster of young fae males, their limbs and features still in that awkward in-between phase. They weren't children anymore, but they hadn't reached maturity, either.

"Don't you grow tired of these beatings?" Jassin asked Thuridan pleasantly, as if he'd come upon the children playing.

"But I cannot hear their thoughts," the younger faerie protested. "Not like you."

"That is why you must use your cunning," Jassin countered. "That is why you set traps with your wits. If you'd bothered observing any of these five, you would know that Namï is in love with Goras, whose bloodline strictly forbids such unions. There are many ways to play it without magic, but for the purpose of this lesson… ah, look at that, young Namï just proclaimed his feelings in a burst of courage. How will Goras take it, I wonder?"

Jassin must have used his abilities to plant a thought or memory, because Namï suddenly looked at his friend with wide-eyed dismay. Goras began to back away, and it seemed with every step he took, their bond unraveled. The other three did the same, glancing between Namï and Goras, then Jassin and Thuridan. Seconds later, all five of them bolted, their shapes and footsteps going faint before fading completely.

Thuridan stared, open-mouthed, while Jassin's eyes gleamed with a familiar triumph.

He was grooming him, I thought with dim horror. Teaching Thuridan to be like him. The young faerie may not have been a telepath, but that hadn't deterred Jassin.

No wonder I'd taken such an instant dislike to this Guardian. A piece of Jassin Sarwraek lived on inside of him.

There was no time to process what I'd just learned. The clock was working against me, and I needed to get into Collith's cell before it was too late. I shook myself and continued to examine Thuridan's past, thinking I could use Jassin against him. I just needed the right memory, the right words.

Despite the scene I'd witnessed, though, I couldn't find any others like it. In the few memories I encountered with Jassin, there were no more glimpses of cruelty or depravity. In Thuridan's mind, Jassin was a shining figure. He'd protected him. He'd raised him. No wonder Thuridan resented me for Jassin's death—I'd practically killed his father.

“Why was he so different for you?” I whispered, more to myself than Thuridan. “What did he stand to gain?”

He loved me! the faerie lashed out, his voice coming at me from every direction.

“No.” My tone was pitying but firm. “Jassin didn’t love anything. He didn’t know what love was. I was inside his head, too. I saw everything.”

I was so intrigued that I forgot we had an audience, and every word I said out loud was being quietly cataloged and filed away by the desperate prisoners filling these cells. This time, Thuridan didn’t respond. I could taste his fear—it had a fruity flavor, like wildberries—but he was careful not to let any terrified thoughts form. I had my claws buried deep inside him, and Thuridan was managing to keep secrets from me. His resilience was both admirable and annoying. I gritted my teeth and prepared to go even further, knowing if he fought me again, we’d both pay a price. I began my search anew and opened another door.

This time, I went still at the sight of Lyari.

She faced Thuridan, both of them in these very dungeons. He stood in front of a door I’d never laid eyes on before. The passageway was so dim that I shouldn’t have been able to see Lyari’s face, but thanks to Thuridan’s fae eyesight, I could see her almost as clearly as if she were a photograph in my hand. She wore her Guardian uniform, of course, and her long hair was in its customary braid. What wasn’t typical, however, was the paper bag she held in one hand, in place of the sword hilt it was usually wrapped around.

“What are you doing here?” Thuridan demanded, unable to hide his flash of temper. He’d been trying to avoid her. He’d taken an extra shift because of it. *Two* extra shifts.

The other Guardian glared at him, and her expression was so familiar, so *Lyari*, that my own heart roused with longing. It felt like years had gone by since I’d seen her last. I forced the feeling aside and refocused on this memory I’d stumbled upon.

“…eaten all day. From the sounds your stomach is making, it seems I was correct, of course. You won’t do a very good job guarding this cell if you’re light-headed with hunger,” she said crossly, thrusting the bag out again.

Thuridan followed the movement of her fingers, thinking of how beautiful they were. I recognized the tightness in his chest because I’d felt

it in my own—longing. Desire. From the ferocity of it, I would guess that Thuridan had been in love with Lyari for a long, long time. But he was wary of his feelings, just as strongly as I edged around what I felt for Collith and Laurie. *Interesting. Very interesting*, I thought, taken off guard.

Lyari rolled her eyes. “Stop overthinking it, Thuridan.”

Hearing his name on her lips sent a rush of unexpected heat to Thuridan’s groin. This was instantly followed by an even stronger, more familiar reaction. When I felt the true extent of his fear, I knew I had him. But my victory was tainted by reluctance; I wished it hadn’t involved Lyari.

The memory wasn’t over yet, and I was too curious to withdraw. Thuridan was still fighting against the wave of feeling, and it felt as if Lyari’s voice came from a distance when he heard her ask, “Did someone hit you in the head?”

Realizing that she’d caught him staring, he scowled to hide his embarrassment. “Take your food and your pity. I want neither,” he snapped.

“Pity has nothing to do with it,” Lyari snapped back. “We’re not children anymore, Thuridan, and I’m not one of the bullies who tormented you. Can’t you let the past be the past?”

Thuridan gave her a scornful smile. “That’s right. I forgot how quickly you can forget things—like your honor, for one thing. Your dignity, as well. Tell me, do you keep the Nightmare’s bed warm for her, or do you just sleep at her feet like a dog?”

Lyari looked back at him, and her face cleared of all emotion. Without another word, she dropped the paper bag at Thuridan’s feet, turned on her heel, and left him in the darkness. As the sound of her footsteps faded, I decided this was the memory I’d use for the first phase of our plan.

It’s precisely because you’re a Nightmare that you must be the one to free him, Laurie had said. As much as I hated to admit it, he was right. Once we’d talked about it in more detail, I couldn’t help but agree. Tricking whatever Guardian was on duty would be far more time efficient than torture or bribery, neither of which would’ve been guaranteed to work, anyway.

There was no more time to waste—there hadn’t been any to begin with—and every moment that passed posed a risk of discovery. Though it felt cruel, I flexed my will effortlessly. In the next breath, Lyari started

screaming. *Collith's cell,* I whispered to Thuridan. *It's coming from Collith's cell.*

Thuridan stood there, his spine ramrod straight, eyes narrowed. Lyari's cries didn't stop, and I sensed his heartbeat quicken as he allowed himself to wonder if they were real. He couldn't see me, couldn't remember meeting me in the passageway, and while his mind worked, I fanned the flames of his agitation as if I were exhaling on a bed of tinder and sparks. I felt the exact moment Thuridan let the fear claim him.

Just as we'd hoped, he fell for my illusion hook, line, and sinker.

Reacting faster than I anticipated, Thuridan disappeared in a blur of movement. I cursed under my breath and bolted after him, hefting the sword up with my aching arm. I could see Thuridan's shape, a dim shadow off to the left. If he entered the cell and I wasn't there, I'd lose precious seconds backtracking. So much of Laurie's scheme came down to timing. I swore again and ran harder.

I caught up with Thuridan at the exact moment he pulled at a deadbolt, grunting with effort. Flakes of rust fluttered toward the ground. I'd been down here several times now, and not once had I wondered where the tunnel ended—my loudest instinct was always to get out as quickly as possible. But the tunnel didn't end with a final cell.

It ended at a door.

It was the same one I'd seen in the memory with Lyari. There was something eerie and forgotten about it. The wood was warped and rotted, and the iron bar that rested in two thick brackets was covered with rust.

Collith was behind that door.

We no longer had the mating bond or the Court bond to sense each other by, but I knew, as sure as I knew my name, that I was right. The door hinges released a series of shrieks and moans, and I winced at the racket. Hopefully any Guardians that might've heard would just assume it was Thuridan.

As he rushed over the threshold, I made sure I was touching him, pressed close to the faerie's back in hopes of confusing the spell. It worked.

Thuridan searched wildly for Lyari. Using my magic with cold efficiency, I set the memory of her on a loop and withdrew from the Guardian's mind. He stared at the far wall, seeing Lyari arrive at the dungeons all over again, holding that paper bag in her hand. *Omar*

mentioned that you took his shift, and I know for a fact that you took Malachi's, too, she said in her brisk way. *It seemed safe to assume that you haven't eaten all day. From the sounds your stomach is making, it seems I was correct, of course.*

But the other person in the room wasn't Lyari.

For the first time in weeks, I laid eyes on Collith Sylvyre, former King of the Unseelie Court, one of the most powerful faeries alive, and the male who'd broken my heart.

At this moment, he didn't look very powerful.

Laurie had been telling the truth about Collith's torture. Not that I'd doubted him, really, but I still hadn't prepared for it.

Torches burned on either side of Collith's prone form, sending a golden glow over the gruesome picture. He hung against the wall across from the door, his ankles and wrists bound in irons that were attached to chains. He wore the same dark pants he'd worn during that final battle in the throne room, but nothing else. Even the steel boots had been removed. The absence of Collith's clothes allowed me to see that his body, usually strong and healthy and alluring, was emaciated. His face was swollen and discolored, which meant he'd been beaten recently, considering his accelerated healing. Those beautiful hazel eyes were closed.

Was he unconscious, or just sleeping? I lowered Thuridan's sword and took another step into the room, then stiffened.

Collith's mental walls had fallen.

Memories and thoughts came at me like a tsunami, all of them drenched in fear. The sword slipped from my grasp and I heard it hit the stones. Trying to stop myself from being swept away in the tide, I caught hold of a memory as if it were an anchor or a buoy, flattening my palm against the closest surface for balance. For a few seconds, my mind thrashed between the past and present. Then I opened my eyes—or Collith opened his eyes—and the dungeon was replaced by the throne room.

It was the night of the last Tithe, back when I was queen and I'd been ruling to buy Collith time. Laurie had just proposed to me in front of everyone, and Collith, wearing the enchanted goblin ring, was now whaling on him like they were fighters in the arena beneath the Seelie Court. They rolled across the flagstones and the crowd scattered like startled birds.

“To the Queen!” Lyari shouted. I remembered that moment; I had been so distracted by the fight that I’d missed what she said.

Collith barely heard her, either. At the same moment my Right Hand gave her order, Laurie’s eyes met his and the chaos around them dimmed. They both paused, just for an instant. Long enough for the Seelie King to whisper with a wicked grin, “There you are.”

A wealth of feeling swelled in Collith’s chest. Pain, fury, longing. It was the longing that made his control fall apart. How could he still want the person responsible for putting his mother in the ground? For her suffering? Collith snarled and drew his arm back to hit Laurie in the face.

Only I knew the truth—terror, not rage, had been the driving force behind that fist. An all-encompassing fear that Collith would give in to that desire.

The memory went on, but I pulled myself out of it, grimacing. It felt like yanking my limbs out of a pool of taffy. Once I was free, I immediately threw defenses up, erecting them how Collith himself had taught me. By that point, I’d figured out why his subconscious was so wide open. *It’s happening again*, I thought with a small stab of guilt. Collith didn’t know he was awake.

The trauma was a result of his time in Hell, where he never would’ve ended up if it hadn’t been for me.

I’d never known how much he was hiding behind that wall. What had he endured down here at Death Bringer’s hands? What could’ve driven him to retreat so deeply into a different reality?

Feel guilty later, Fortuna. Right now, the priority was getting Collith. His psyche kept slamming at me as I skirted around the wooden table in the middle of the room, its center laden with cruel-looking tools that winked in the firelight. Every single one was covered in a crusty, dark substance.

Blood. Collith’s blood.

Realizing this was the table I’d put my hand on, I shuddered, and I was about to look away when one of the tools caught my eye. It looked like a… chain breaker. My eyebrows shot up, and I glanced at the chains securing Collith to the wall. Could it really be that easy? Would the teeth of the chain breaker fit around those iron links? Yes, I decided. Besides the convenience of it, I liked the irony of setting Collith free with something that had been intended to keep him broken.

But the instant I touched the chain breaker, I jerked my hand back with a hiss. The tools had been soaked in holy water. *Fuck*, I thought. I didn't see any gloves, and there was nothing else I could use to protect my skin. I could still pick the locks on Collith's manacles, as we'd originally planned, but I'd spent too long in Thuridan's head—I should've been onto phase two by now.

Chain breakers it is. I heaved a long, deep sigh. "This is going to *hurt*, you guys."

Neither of them responded; Thuridan was still lusting after a nonexistent Lyari and Collith hadn't stirred. I stood there and searched for other ways to stall, but as the real Lyari had once informed me, I didn't have the luxury of weakness. So I gritted my teeth, focused on Collith, and picked up the chain breaker.

The feeling was comparable to what I imagined acid felt like. Agony shot up my throat and lodged between my teeth, turning the scream into a violent hiss. I rushed over to Collith and tried to keep every movement steady and efficient, knowing a mistake would mean another moment clutching these hellish handles. My skin smoked as if the metal were setting it on fire, and I was still trying to guard myself from Collith's mental onslaught. In an effort to concentrate on what I was doing, instead of the pain, I counted the seconds. Thirteen—that's how many it took to free Collith.

Both the tool and the chains fell to the dirt with a muffled clatter. I let out a sob, afraid to look at my shaking hands. At the same moment, Collith dropped to his knees, his head still bent. I swore for the umpteenth time and rushed to hold him upright. In that split second, I forgot to keep my mind protected. Collith's pain and terror were everywhere again. I saw his father sitting on the throne. There was a flash of Naevys, only half of her body visible as the earth slowly consumed her. I saw my own face streaked with tears, my mouth forming the words of a spell that would banish Collith from my life.

Wincing, I fell to my knees beside him. The position made it easier to support his weight. "Collith!" I hissed, shaking the parts of him that looked uninjured. "Hey, it's me, it's Fortuna. I'm here now, okay? But you need to snap out of it."

More thoughts. More images. More faces I knew and moments I recognized.

Like the one whispering through me now.

I don't want to see this. The thought was mine, but… I wasn't sure it was true. Because Laurie and Collith, especially *naked* Laurie and Collith, was a sight to behold. They were in a garden, from the looks of it, their bodies surrounded by trees and hedges. Collith knelt behind Laurie, grasping Laurie's hips to shift his entire body backward while he thrust forward. Laurie moaned. He cried Collith's name. He clutched the ground as if he were coming undone. Collith's eyes closed in ecstasy.

Without warning, roses began to bloom all around them.

Neither Collith or Laurie noticed at first. But soon there were so many that the air seemed to turn pink. The flowers grew as if the laws of gravity had no meaning, sprouting in mid-air, floating over the lovers like dust motes. With every touch, every kiss, every plunge, more appeared. They were the most beautiful blooms I'd ever seen, red as human blood, the petals perfectly formed.

A moment later, I discovered that I was wrong. Because as Collith and Laurie came, both of them filling the air with their shouts, the roses changed again… and *these* were the most beautiful blooms I'd ever seen. Their sweet fragrance reminded me of the dreamscape, somehow.

Laurie finally opened his eyes, and when he registered what he was seeing, his brows knitted together. "Collith," he murmured. "Look."

Easing away from Laurie, Collith looked around them with a bewildered expression. "Is this real?" he asked.

"No. It's an illusion. I know this essence." Laurie's voice dropped to a whisper. Slowly, he looked at Collith, and his eyes filled with realization. Realization and a terrible sort of acceptance. "This is *my* essence. *My* power. You took it from me."

The roses wilted. Collith shook his head, an automatic denial, but the way his stomach sank said otherwise. Now that he'd seen the roses, along with the shadow in Laurie's face, he could feel it. The power. It was subtle, and yet it didn't belong. He'd done enough training with magic to know it hadn't been there a few minutes ago.

"Laurelis, if it's true, I didn't know," he began. "I had no idea—"

Too late, Collith noticed that Laurie's sword was gone. It had been resting in the grass beside them, where it was discarded during their frenzied undressing. Laurie swung it when Collith was halfway through his

sentence. The Unseelie prince moved in a blur, but even that wasn't quick enough.

The tip of Laurie's sword sliced down his face.

And the shriveled roses crumbled into dust.

I jerked back from the memory before I could hear Collith scream. I could still feel it hurtling up my throat, though, just as it had for Collith when he felt the burn of holy water on Laurie's blade. I didn't want to see any more. Didn't want to be privy to any more of his secrets.

Desperate to stop the relentless tide battering at my mind, I buried my stinging fingers in Collith's hair and lifted his head. But my lips, when they pressed to his, were gentle.

It was the first time I'd kissed Collith since learning his darkest secret. Since he'd betrayed my trust and thrown everything into question.

Collith returned to me within seconds. I heard his sound of surprise, felt his eyelashes flutter against my cheek. Then, as he came alive, kissing me back with a ferocity that he'd never shown before, my pain was drowned out by the desire. From the moment I'd met him, Collith could bring it out in me, no matter how hard I fought it.

I wasn't fighting it now, though. Collith moved as if he had no injuries, and he cupped my face, slanting his mouth harder against mine. Zara must've been here recently, because he tasted like the tea she'd made me drink once. Now that he was fully conscious, his secrets and memories were tucked away behind that wall, and the air around us was blissfully silent. Well, as silent as it could be with a fae warrior a few yards away, trying to break free of the illusion I'd trapped him inside.

Somehow I'd ended up in Collith's lap, my knees resting on either side of his hips. Acting as if his injuries didn't exist, or he didn't even feel them, Collith leaned into me. The pieces of chain still attached to his manacles made a rattling sound. His fingers trailed down my neck, my shoulders, my back, then finally stopped to cup my ass. I ground against him, momentarily swayed by the lies my body was telling me. I wrapped both my arms around his neck and made a sound deep in my throat, a sound that betrayed everything I still felt for him.

But in spite of the ache between my legs, I'd forgotten nothing. Not for one second. After another moment, I broke the kiss, leaning back to see Collith's face.

“Are you able to use your powers?” I asked. My voice was as cold as the air around us. “This entire plan sort of falls apart without them.”

“Your hands,” Collith rasped, reaching for me.

I jerked away, and I had to stop myself from putting even more distance between us. I glanced down at my palms to see the damage, and it wasn’t as bad as I thought—just some blisters and red skin. “Not your problem,” I said evenly. “This is just a temporary truce. Once we’ve rescued you and our lives aren’t in danger anymore, all bets are off. Now can you use your powers or not?”

Glancing toward Thuridan, Collith rested his head against the rocky wall with a weary expression. “In small bursts, I think. What *is* the plan? Where’s Laurelis?”

It was one of the few times Collith had said Laurie’s name without any venom in his tone. I almost asked him how he knew Laurie was involved, but when was that silver-haired bastard ever *not* involved? Instead, I leaned forward and put my lips next to Collith’s ear. Speaking as quietly as a breath, I told him everything. What Laurie was doing, what I needed, and the part Collith would play if we wanted to pull this off.

When I was done, I leaned back again. There was a twist to Collith’s lips that looked like begrudging respect.

“Can you do it?” I asked bluntly. Laurie had known Collith would be weakened, of course, but I wasn’t sure he’d anticipated the extent of it. We’d underestimated the lengths Viessa would go to keep her throne.

“Yes.” Collith didn’t hesitate. He raised his gaze, and those hazel depths were carefully neutral now. King Collith’s eyes. “You’ll have to trust me, though. Can *you* do it?”

The question wasn’t a taunt or a challenge. I knew that without trying to see beneath his mask. No matter how vilified Collith had become to me, I’d been in his head. I knew his love had been real. I knew who he was. It had just been the lie that shattered us. His enormous, world-tilting lie.

In response to his question, I gritted my teeth and opened my mind to him.

Collith didn’t spend precious seconds asking for permission again. A moment later, I felt him inside my skull, and it was like his soul had brushed against mine for the briefest of moments. Collith’s presence was like the faerie himself—cool and gentle. Still, as he twined through my thoughts and grasped bits of consciousness, I was rigid. I reminded myself

that he wasn't there to take anything or poke around. Collith knew his purpose, and he hadn't deviated from it.

Near the memory of my parents' deaths, though, he hesitated. A second went by, then two. I felt myself start to frown. Why had he stopped?

Fear. Collith could sense the fear inside that cluster of images.

If I'd been nervous before, I was almost buzzing with agitation now. I kept forgetting that Collith was a Nightmare, or at least part of him was. He may have known power during all his years as a faerie, maybe even considered himself adept at controlling it, but he'd never faced the temptation of fear. Not like this. When a Nightmare sensed another creature's terror, it was like lust and adrenaline and euphoria rolled into one feeling.

We were running out of time, damn it.

Just as I was about to shove Collith out of my head, I thought of Naevys. *Have faith in him*, she'd told me with her last, dying breath. I thought of my own parents. What kind of person would I have become if I hadn't been guided by Matthew Sworn? If I hadn't had someone good and kind to nurture me? Believing in me every day as I learned the boundaries of my power?

I'd probably be making bigger mistakes than Collith. Hell, I *had* made bigger mistakes than Collith.

Feeling restless again, I returned my attention to whatever he was doing in my brain. But… he was gone. At some point during my inner struggle, Collith had finished weaving his magic and carefully extracted himself. I opened my eyes, startled by the action. When did I close them?

Collith looked back at me silently. *Did it work?* I wondered, darting a glance over the rest of the cell.

I jumped when Collith answered, *Yes*. His mouth didn't move when he said it, which meant our minds were still connected.

Suddenly I remembered what it felt like to have a mating bond between us. To feel what he was feeling, to be attached by something that felt like fate but was even more inevitable. I remembered that night he'd showed me his house and we danced in the dew-filled garden.

"Can you walk?" I asked abruptly, making a point to say it out loud.

This time, Collith didn't answer. From the hard set of his jaw, I knew he wasn't ignoring the question—he was using every drop of strength left

in his veins to stand. I didn't move to help him. Instead, he used the wall for support, his long fingers splaying against the stones. I found myself staring at those fingers, remembering how beautiful I used to find them. Reliving the things those fingers had done to me in bathtubs, beds, and forests.

Shaking myself, I retrieved Thuridan's sword from the ground, quickly outlining the rest of Laurie's plan. Collith finally managed to straighten. A vein stood out in his throat and he was pale with strain.

"Ready?" I asked, my tone heavy with meaning.

Collith's gaze didn't waver. "Ready," he said.

The word felt like someone had pressed down on a gas pedal, launching my engine of a heart. Tightening my lips to hide how they trembled, I nodded and turned to leave. But then I saw Thuridan. He was at the part of the conversation with Lyari when he'd deliberately chosen words to repel her. *Tell me, do you keep the Nightmare's bed warm for her?*

I slowed to a halt in front of him, and Thuridan stared back with glassy eyes. I studied his features and thought about his fear. I'd used it because I knew firsthand how powerful the avoidance of love could be. Especially when love felt undeserved.

There was no time, but for this, I'd take the risk.

"I'm not going to free you," I told the warrior, knowing some part of him would hear me. "Consider it a… peace offering. Because what I'm giving you *is* a gift, Thuridan Sarwraek, no matter how shitty it may feel right now. Most people don't know this, but if someone breaks out from a Nightmare's magic, it usually means one of two things. One, they died. This is the most common outcome, and if I'm being honest, it's probably yours. You *did* just try to kill me, so I don't feel too bad about it. The second outcome, and the more rare occurrence, is that the morsel has overcome their fear. My power stopped working on them, because they were no longer afraid of the thing I'd created, you see? Basically, if you manage to survive this, you'll be free… to love her. And if she loves you back, you'll be the luckiest asshole alive. So good luck, asshole. You'll need it. Oh, and I'm keeping the sword."

I turned away from Thuridan and fixed my eyes on the door. *Here goes nothing*, I thought. I took a small breath and moved toward the darkness, fighting the instinct to kick Collith out of my head. He appeared at my side, and strangely enough, being able to see him made it easier to let his

magic have me. I looked back at the yawning tunnel, the torches even dimmer now.

Together, Collith and I walked out of that small, terrible room, and neither of us looked back.

The wall of cells loomed ahead. Collith matched my pace without complaint, his stiff gait the only indication that he was in pain. He almost had me convinced of his recovery, but we were halfway to the stairs when he stumbled. I caught hold of him again, no small feat when I was carrying Thuridan's sword. The movement made something catch my eye. I frowned and shifted to see Collith's back. Fresh blood dribbled down his skin, and I knew this was the splotch of darkness I'd spotted.

"Did someone *stab* you?" I breathed, staring at the wound. Had it torn open when I was sitting in Collith's lap? Damn it. *Nothing* good ever came from making out with Collith Sylvyre. When would I ever learn?

He raised his gaze and started to answer, but then his attention flicked to something over my shoulder. "Behind you," Collith said, making a move to shove me.

I raised my sword just as Nuvian's came down. The blades clashed, sending a ringing sound into the stillness. The reflection of a nearby torch flickered in his eyes, which looked black in the gloom. In a move that made it abundantly clear I was outclassed, Nuvian swung his sword around and sent me stumbling back. I bared my teeth and instinctively delved inside his mind, using my power like most people take a breath.

But then I remembered that damn promise I'd made, and I stopped. In that frozen, silent instant we found ourselves staring at each other, our faces inches apart, I saw fear flare in Nuvian's eyes. No matter how much he probably wanted to hide it, he knew I was stronger than him. His life was in my hands.

I may have promised not to use my abilities on him, but I hadn't said anything about swords.

In a swift, skilled move, I used the instincts Adam had ingrained in me and maneuvered Nuvian's blade around mine, using his own weight as momentum to force him backward. Nuvian recovered in an instant, but it was too late. I held the tip of the sword I'd stolen against the golden column of his throat.

"You shouldn't be scared of what I've done—you should be scared of what I can do," I told him quietly. I lowered the sword and stepped back.

“You saved my life, and now I’ve spared yours. We’re even.”

Slow clapping disrupted the hushed tension between us.

Nuvian and I moved apart, and I swung to face whoever was making that sound. Viessa stood farther down the tunnel, half in shadow, a contingent of Guardians at her back.

Lyari Paynore was one of them.

It was the first time we’d seen each other since Belanor’s cherubim had taken me from the hospital. I briefly met her gaze before returning my focus to the new queen. My mind raced with questions. Was Lyari pretending to be loyal to Viessa? Or had she been pretending with me? Was that why she’d ignored my summons?

“I knew you’d come for our boy sooner or later,” Viessa said by way of greeting. Tonight, the Ice Queen was wearing black. A gown of glittering, endless black. “You didn’t kill the guard on duty, did you? Because I’d have to hurt you for that, and I really don’t want to hurt you.”

Thankfully, she seemed to have left Paul somewhere else this evening, so Viessa’s threat didn’t worry me as much as she meant it to. As Collith moved to stand beside me, I made a sound of contempt and gestured at the Guardians with my sword. “What is this? A game? Some twisted form of entertainment? If ruling the Unseelie Court is that boring, let me tell you, you’re doing it wrong.”

“I can’t let you save him, Fortuna,” Viessa said, ignoring the sarcasm that dripped off my words. “He still has supporters, and if Collith goes free, it would only be a matter of time before he comes back for the throne. Except next time, he might be smarter about it and bring an army with him.”

I raised my eyebrows. “We have a problem, then, because I’m not leaving him down here to be tortured.”

Viessa tilted her head. A calculating expression came over her face, but I had learned to recognize a fae trick when I saw one. She was pretending to think, but whatever came out of her mouth next was the real reason she’d let me get this close to Collith. There was a reason it had been so easy. Viessa wanted something, and she was using me to get it.

“He has information I need,” she said finally. “By all means, if you can persuade Collith to tell me what I want to know, I’d be happy to revisit the issue of his confinement.”

And there it is. I understood now. Collith had withstood their tortures, and Viessa thought I was his weakness. A new tactic. I'd choose how to play this once I could see the entire board, I decided silently. "What is it you want to know?" was all I said.

She didn't pretend to think about this response. "Bank account numbers. The location of hidden passageways within this Court. The sort of things only a king would know."

If Viessa wanted account numbers, maybe she hadn't been able to access the crown's finances. *The council members*, I thought suddenly. She'd disbanded their organization and taken their power. In return, those bloodlines had probably pulled whatever investments they'd made, or called in their loans. I couldn't remember the technicalities of how everything worked—during Lyari or Nuvian's lectures, my thoughts had kept drifting off. I was regretting that now.

I mulled over the reasons I should keep that information from Viessa, but I couldn't come up with any. Despite my guilt over how I'd handled my abdication, I didn't want to rule again. Unless Collith gathered an army and reclaimed his power, ruling wasn't an option for him, either. With a mental shrug, I turned slightly and directed my next words at the dethroned king. "Are you feeling more talkative now?"

If he handed the information over to Viessa, she might actually let us go free. We could walk out of here without shedding a single drop of blood. Collith knew what his refusal meant; I could see it in the set of his jaw. But he still answered exactly how I'd known he would. "No."

Good thing I didn't mind spilling a little blood.

I gave Collith a grim smile, then turned to face Viessa. I hoped the fae couldn't hear my rapid heartbeat. Adjusting my grip on the sword, I shifted so that I stood slightly in front of Collith.

It was the equivalent of drawing a line in the sand. If the tension had been subtle before, it was everywhere now, and I knew the faeries had gotten my message loud and clear. Including Lyari. I matched Viessa's regretful tone as I said, "Forgive the cliché… but if you want him, you'll have to go through me."

"Actually, you'll have to go through *us*."

Laurie materialized on my other side. I glanced at him, knowing he'd see my annoyance. *Took you long enough.*

He shrugged as if to say, *I wanted to see how this would play out.* To Viessa he said, “This may seem like a strange request, but would you take about seven steps backward?”

I frowned. Seven steps? Did that mean what I thought it did?

Viessa heaved a sigh at the sight of Laurie. “You do realize this means war between our Courts, Prince Laurelis.”

“If you wanted to get me in bed, dear, all you had to do was ask. I mean, I would’ve rejected you in a heartbeat, but you still could’ve asked.” Dismissing her, Laurie’s gaze moved to Collith. Something passed between them.

“Why?” Collith said. He was asking Laurie why he was here.

The other faerie’s answering grin was faint, bittersweet. “No one tortures you but me. Those manacles are hot, by the way.”

“Seven steps?” he asked suddenly.

Laurie nodded. “Give or take.”

A blast of ice shot down the length of the tunnel, making me slam against the wall and lose my grip on the sword. Shards still caught my shoulder, shredding through the layer of polyester, tearing skin as easily as bits of glass. I cried out, but I knew it was probably nothing compared to Laurie’s wound. He’d been Viessa’s target, and he’d been standing partially in front of me.

Through the haze of pain, I heard Viessa speaking again. Her voice was as cold as the frost covering the cell bars next to us. “It’s clear now, why I could never fully claim your heart, Collith,” she said. To me she said, “I like you, Fortuna Sworn. I wish I didn’t. It would make this far easier.”

Lowering her hands, Viessa stepped back and nodded to Nuvian. He, in turn, signaled to one of the Guardians behind him. I searched for Lyari, but she must’ve shifted out of view. Collith, me, and Laurie were all wounded, robbed of speed and strength. Gil couldn’t help us.

Shit. We didn’t plan for this.

That was all I had time to think before Nuvian gripped me by the throat. He placed the tip of his sword at my gut, and his arm tensed. If I could’ve moved my mouth, I would’ve screamed.

“*Now* we’re even,” Nuvian whispered, his eyes boring into mine.

He never got the chance to make the killing blow. He’d barely finished speaking when Collith *bellowed.* It was a sound I’d never heard him make before. And then… he imploded.

Heavenly fire—more lightning than the red-orange flames people thought of when they heard the word *fire*—filled the dark. Lyari materialized at my side and yanked me down the tunnel, out of the inferno's path.

The heat was so powerful that it burned a hole in Nuvian's shoulder and through the other Guardian in its path. It knocked all the faeries in the passageway back as if they were a bunch of bowling balls. Collith stood before them, his chest heaving, his eyes burning hotter than the flames he'd just released. His bare, bloody body gleamed in the torchlight.

"Threaten her again," he said quietly, a drop of sweat sliding down his temple, "and their deaths will seem like a mercy compared to yours. Would you say that was seven steps?"

"I'd say so. Excellent work, Sylvyre." Laurie appeared on my other side, and I was relieved to see his wound had already started healing. But Nuvian didn't look at him. He didn't look at any of us, actually. His blue eyes scanned our surroundings, and he didn't try to hide a confused frown. I followed his gaze. In an instant, I knew why he was so mystified.

We weren't on the path next to the cells anymore.

When Collith had thrown so much power behind that blast, he'd lost hold of the illusion he'd been casting over everyone. The illusion he'd created the moment I let him inside my head. The illusion Laurie had also been working on from the moment Viessa and her guards arrived in the passageway at the top of the stairs, and had continued all the way down here.

I abruptly switched my focus to Viessa. I knew the instant she figured out what we'd done because I was watching her face when it happened.

The queen was standing inside the very cell she had put Collith in.

The cell she'd still been seven steps away from when Laurie finally revealed himself.

From the moment they set foot in these dungeons, Viessa and her Guardians had been under the sway of Laurie and Collith's shared power. An intricately designed illusion. It was necessary to put the images inside my head, too, since I'd had to stick to the limitations of the room in order to lure Viessa and her Guardians over the threshold… and across the boundary of the spell.

A spell that Savannah Simonson couldn't break. She did, however, manage to alter it. Just as Laurie had hoped.

We stood on the other side of it, protected by the very magic Viessa was now trapped by. *Although she doesn't know that yet*, I thought.

"I made a few tweaks to the spell," Laurie said cheerfully. "You and your Guardians can't leave this room."

Well, now she does.

Viessa didn't answer. She was looking, I noticed, at the mark on the floor we'd been trying so hard not to draw notice to. Savannah had warned us it would be there. Apparently it had been necessary for the success of the spell. *Maybe Viessa doesn't see it*, I thought hopefully. *Maybe she won't know what it is.*

"I demand you break that chalk line," Viessa called. I swallowed a sigh —of course she had enough knowledge about magic to understand what it was. Viessa Folduin was intelligent, despite her questionable taste in men.

"You're not in any position to make demands," I told her.

The queen didn't look at me. "I wasn't talking to you."

It had felt so natural to have Lyari at my back that I'd forgotten she wasn't supposed to be there. If she obeyed Viessa, it was all over for us. Collith wouldn't be able to repeat another blast. Laurie was still healing. I could try to fight this battle on my own, but I wasn't sure my powers could be depended upon. Nuvian had also just proven that he could gain the upper hand when my guard was lowered.

The boundary needed to stay in place.

"Lyari, that was a direct order from your queen," Viessa added. "If you disobey, you may consider yourself banished from this Court."

Okay, that changed things. Thrumming with tension, I started to tell Lyari she should break the line, but Laurie put his hand on my wrist. I jerked my head toward him and he gave a single, wordless shake of his head. *Don't.* I stared, my stomach sinking. Laurie knew what it meant for Lyari if she was banished, and he was still choosing the spell. It meant that he didn't like our odds, either. How much power had he drained casting that illusion over so many minds, several of them just as powerful as his?

Before I could decide what to do, Lyari stepped back.

We all listened to the sound of her heel sinking onto the stone. She lifted her chin and gazed steadily at Viessa. She didn't say a word, but her answer was clear.

I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe she'd just done that for me.

Slowly, I turned back to Viessa, half-expecting to see a ball of ice forming between her hands. But she stood there calmly, the force of Guardians gathered behind her again. When our eyes met, a small, faint smile touched Viessa's red lips—she'd accepted that we had won this round.

"Are we still friends?" I asked her, flashing a weak grin in return.

To my surprise, the Unseelie Queen smiled back with a warmth that actually seemed genuine this time. "Hell, yes."

Huh, I thought. In spite of the bad things she'd done, like just declaring war on my… whatever Laurie was, I still liked her. I could imagine a friendship with this faerie made of ice and a dark fire. "I'm glad. Really," I added, feeling awkward. "I'll call you sometime. Maybe we can have a girls night or something. I'll get your number from Lyari, I'm sure she has it."

I could feel Laurie's silent laughter beside me. "Oh, shut up," I growled at him.

With that, I stepped back and closed the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

We made our way through the maze with preternatural speed.

Gil and Laurie carried Collith between them, his arms slung over their shoulders. Lyari walked ahead of our small group, leading the way through every trick and turn of the Unseelie Court, while I brought up the rear. We'd bought ourselves some time by trapping Viessa and Nuvian—exactly as Laurie had planned—but they wouldn't stay put long. Especially if Viessa used her bond with the Guardians to make them aware of Collith's escape. Maybe I should've let Laurie knock her unconscious like he'd wanted to.

"I have a safe house in Amsterdam," Laurie informed us under his breath. "Once we reach the Door, keep the thought of the St. Nicholas Basilica uppermost in your minds, please."

"Where was this safe house yesterday, before we came to the Unseelie Court?" I demanded in a hot whisper.

Laurie shushed me. "Quickly, now. Mustn't waste time."

Only knowledge of the argument we were about to have kept me from kicking him in the shin—I'd already decided that I was going home, but now wasn't the time to announce that. I had a feeling Lyari especially would have some pointed comments to make. They wouldn't change my mind, though. I was desperate to make sure Finn had gotten back to the house safely.

So I walked behind the three males silently, keeping my focus on every flickering shadow and pulse of darkness. The Unseelie Court was full of monsters, and most of them weren't in the cages we'd left behind. Since I wasn't the queen anymore, it wasn't considered treasonous to harm me.

The thought made me reach for a weapon that wasn't there. Suddenly I wished I'd taken the time to find Thuridan's sword after Viessa knocked it out of my hand with her icy blast. I told myself I wouldn't have been able to hold it anyway. Without the constant flow of adrenaline, pain had returned to my blistered fingers and palms.

As we neared the surface, dry earth crunching beneath our shoes, I began to recognize certain passages. I quickened my pace to brush past the others and fall into step with Lyari, looking at her sidelong to gauge her expression. As always, it was smoothed into the bland mask of a Guardian… but she wasn't a Guardian anymore, and I was a Nightmare. I could sense her fear as if it were a perfume she'd sprayed all over her body.

"We'll figure it out," I told her quietly, hoping Laurie and Gil were too preoccupied to eavesdrop. "You won't be a goblin, Lyari."

She didn't look at me. I knew it had to be my own anxiety, but in the shadows and firelight, her lithe profile already seemed a bit sharper. A bit more haggard. "Without the power of the Unseelie Court, I will be weakened," Lyari said after a long pause. "I won't be able to protect you as efficiently."

I made a sound partway between a laugh and a scoff. "You're a *warrior*, Lyari of bloodline Paynore. Cutting ties with this Court doesn't change that."

It was almost the same thing she'd told me about being queen. The faerie's throat moved as she swallowed. It was one of the few times she'd ever allowed me to see any vulnerability, and the sight made my insides twist. "I'll make sure there aren't any Guardians waiting for us on the surface," was all Lyari said.

Without giving me a chance to respond, she quickened her pace and left me behind. There was a hunch to her shoulders that hadn't been there before. Watching her go, I wanted to tell my friend how the dark reveals things just as often as it hides them. Stars shine brightest in the sky, plants thrive at the bottom of the ocean, fireflies flicker over the grass. Somehow, I would make sure that her sacrifice tonight—separating herself from the Unseelie Court forever—didn't end in the fate she'd always feared.

We made it to the surface without any trouble. I stopped when the Door was within sight and moved to stand in front of the others, crossing my arms. The movement jarred the wound in my shoulder, and I hid a wince.

“What are you doing?” Laurie demanded. The question made Collith lift his head.

“Saying goodbye. I’m not going to Amsterdam with you.” Taking a page from Lyari’s book, I didn’t give them the opportunity to protest. I angled my body toward Gil and addressed the next part to him. “Again, you’re welcome to come back with me. Adam would probably be willing to help you control the bloodlust. He’s a good guy, I promise.”

To my surprise, the vampire moved so that he was standing next to me. “Couldn’t hurt to meet him, I suppose,” he muttered.

I knew Adam was only part of the reason he wanted to stay at my side, but I was grateful Gil didn’t reveal the rest of it. His sleeve brushed against mine, and subtle emotions pulsed from the bond. The same emotions I felt when I heard Matthew’s laugh, or saw Damon’s smile, or Emma put her arm around me. The same warmth that filled my chest every time I saw Gretchen pour a drink, or Bea punch numbers into her calculator, or Finn’s golden eyes turned toward me.

It was love.

Schooling my features into a hard mask, I looked back at the two faeries I’d dethroned. Collith’s face was carefully expressionless. Laurie, however, was frowning. “I thought we already discussed the danger of returning to Granby,” he said.

“You’re not the only one with a plan. Don’t worry about me.” My tone was dismissive, and I accentuated this with a flap of my hand. I hoped it disguised the way my heart had quickened. I didn’t let myself look at Laurie, because I knew—I *knew*—he’d see the truth in an instant. Gil hadn’t been the only one I formed a bond with during my time at the Seelie Court, and everything that happened between me and Laurie afterward had only muddied the waters more. I didn’t know what to say or how to act. Just like last night, though, I did know that I didn’t want to be separated from him. From them.

And that terrified me most of all.

“I’m sure I’ll see you soon,” I said, grateful that I sounded normal, at least.

There was another pause. No one else in the tunnel spoke. Laurie lowered his chin and leveled a look at me that somehow conveyed a dozen promises all at once. “Count on it,” he replied.

I'd been preparing for a debate, or maybe even an altercation of some sort. As the silence stretched, Gil edged away from the three of us, joining Lyari farther down the passageway. I didn't move.

I could feel Collith watching us. Collith, who I'd been desperately in love with not so long ago. Collith, who still had an effect on me, no matter how many lies I told myself. Now that he was out of immediate danger, I refused to acknowledge him.

Which is why I startled myself by saying to Laurie, "It looked like he was stabbed with a holy blade. You may want to call a healer once you get to that safe house."

As I turned to leave, I was half-afraid Laurie would snag my hand and pull me against him, regardless of our audience. But he didn't, and I walked up the path unencumbered. Once I reached Gil and Lyari, I gave the vampire a tremulous smile. "Think of the woods outside Granby," I told him.

"What the fuck is a Granby?"

For an instant, I almost had the urge to laugh. Almost. "It's the town where I live," I answered. "It's just outside of Denver. Remember, you don't have to know what the destination looks like. You just need to—"

"—express your desire to get there," Gil finished. "Stop worrying about everyone else and get a move on, Nightmare."

With that, he went the rest of the way up the path and vanished. Lyari must've lost patience with us and used the Door, since she was nowhere to be found. I cast another glance around the tunnel before I slowly followed my companions, strangely nervous. Why did the thought of going home make me apprehensive?

That didn't matter right now. Letting out a tense breath, I shoved my aching hands into my pockets and ascended the sloped path. Once I reached the crack in the earth the others had already gone through, I was tempted to look back at Laurie and Collith. But I was afraid of what they would see in my expression, so I walked through the Door without pausing.

It was even colder aboveground. A gust of air greeted me, instantly chilling my skin, and the sky was the color of cotton candy. Gil had wandered a few yards away and stood between two trees, his back to me. This time, I did allow myself a moment, and I faltered in front of the stone doorway. Was there any chance I was still dreaming? Had we truly won?

Closing my eyes, I took a long, deep inhale through my nose, and the sting of cold in my nostrils reassured me. An image of Collith's battered face floated in the darkness. *Truce over*, I thought.

I opened my eyes and started in the direction of home.

It had been weeks since I'd walked among these trees. By all appearances, no one else had, either. There was no path or trail, and a layer of untouched snow covered everything. It crunched under my tennis shoes and slipped inside them, freezing against my bare ankles. Gil fell into step beside me, but Lyari stayed ahead of us, appearing sporadically through the white-laden trees. We didn't talk for a while, and I mulled over everything that had happened since I'd learned the truth about Collith. About all the mistakes I'd made.

"I want to learn how to control my power," I blurted, turning to Gil. "Will you help me?"

Silence met my request. The blond vampire arched his head back and gazed upward. I felt his pain as he thought about what he had lost, too. We'd been so focused on surviving that he hadn't been able to grieve it. "I'll help you," he said.

"Thanks, Gil."

There was so much we could have said after that. Regardless of the fact that we'd die for each other, this vampire and I, we were still strangers in a thousand ways. We may have known the shape of each other's souls, but we didn't have the small details. The insignificant facts that added up to an altogether significant being. And yet… neither of us spoke again. Not until we caught up with Lyari, who had stopped at the edge of a very familiar line of trees.

Twilight spread across the horizon behind the barn, making it look as if the structure were bleeding. Every window was a square of yellow light and multiple cars filled the driveway, one of them the van that I'd commandeered from the goblins.

Home.

Gil didn't ask if we'd arrived. Not only could he probably see it on my face, he could feel it, too. I took a step forward, then hesitated. Until this moment, I hadn't really given thought to how the others might feel about me bringing a newborn vampire into our lives. Haltingly I said, "Would you mind… waiting here? I haven't seen my family since I was taken, and I just want…"

Gil dipped into an odd little bow. “Say no more. Your wish is my command, Conqueror of the Leviathan, Challenger of the—”

Just like that, the heaviness that had been surrounding us dissipated. I shoved him, scowling. “Shut your whore mouth!”

Laughter thickened in his voice. “Had I known I was in the presence of such greatness, I never would have turned my back.”

This time I launched at him, and Gil leaped backward to avoid my fingers, his fangs flashing as he snickered some more. Before I could swing my leg up and kick him in the throat, he was gone, scrabbling up an impossibly tall tree. “Go on, then,” the vampire called down, waving his pale hand. “I’ll be here when you’ve finished telling your family what horrible danger you’ve put them in.”

“Fuck you. I have a *plan*, damn it,” I snapped back. Gil just waved again.

“This is why I hate the British,” Lyari said flatly. I turned to her, wondering why she’d stopped. Lyari saw the question in my eyes and added, “I’ll wait out here, too. Reunions make me itchy.”

“Have it your way. I’ll summon you when the emotional part is over.” Battling a surge of guilt over leaving Gil in a tree, of all things, I stalked through the yard and approached the barn. At the door, I halted again and stared at the handle, willing myself to reach for it. A memory assaulted me —Collith’s soft smile as he revealed what he’d been working on all those weeks. *My home is where you are.*

As if I could lock the memory out, I hurried inside and slid the bar over the door. I ascended the stairs without delay, worried that any more pauses would be enough to make me lose my nerve. I reached the door at the top within seconds, and suddenly I wished I’d stalled a little. The air was still and silent. No shadows moved past the crack of light near my feet. Should I… knock? *No, that would be strange. You live here.* Annoyed by my own uncertainty, I tried the knob and discovered it was unlocked. I lingered in the stairwell to take some calming breaths, and then I finally went inside.

The space was lit with lamps, everything darkened and serene. It looked the same, and yet not. Everything had been new and untouched when I left. Now the couch had indents in the cushions, toys littered the floor, and there was fresh fruit on the countertop. A vase of flowers rested on a side table. The wall hooks to my left were heavy with coats and

scarves. Small details that made a place into a home. I closed the door behind me, looking around with a warm feeling in my chest.

There was no one in the kitchen or living area, but there were soft sounds coming from Damon's room. Was Matthew waking up from a late nap? Driven by a rush of anticipation, I strode across the loft and knocked on the door.

It must not have been shut all the way, because at the tap of my knuckles, it creaked open. Before I could react, I had a perfect view of the bed, and I glimpsed my naked brother kneeling on all fours in front of someone… who was also naked.

"Oh," I said with blank surprise. "*Oh*."

I rushed to close the door again, but the man spotted me, and our gazes met just before he yelped and fell to the floor. Damon yanked at the bedsheet and wrapped it around his waist, staring at me with more disbelief than annoyance. "Fortuna? Is that you?"

I gave him an awkward finger wave. In the corner of the room, his lover began frantically pulling on his clothes. "Hey, there," I said weakly. "Yes, it's me. I'm back. You know, why don't I go to the kitchen while…"

I left the sentence unfinished and made my retreat. As I rushed to close the door behind me, and I crossed the length of the main room again, a grin tugged at the corners of my mouth. Of all the homecomings I'd imagined, this certainly hadn't been one of them. *Way to go, Damon,* I thought.

To occupy myself while they got dressed, I moved toward the cupboard to fetch a glass. I had just turned from the sink, water in hand, when Damon emerged from the bedroom. He'd switched out his birthday suit for a pair of jeans and a knit pullover, I noted with another burst of amusement. Our eyes met, and Damon walked toward me with soft purpose. There was a hint of laughter in my voice as I started, "I'm so sorry, I should've—oh."

Damon wrapped his arms around me—which were sturdier than they'd been a few weeks ago, I noted with faint surprise—and didn't say a word. I expected a brief, brisk hug, but he held on. I felt my brother's cheek rest against the side of my head. Slowly, I set the water down and put my arms around him, too. The movement should've hurt, but the pain from touching that holy chain breaker had completely faded. After another moment, I grasped my wrists at the small of his back and pressed even

closer. When did my little brother get so much taller than me? A familiar stinging entered my eyes, and I blinked, fast and hard.

This, I thought. This was the embrace I'd dreamed of when I first found him at the Unseelie Court all those months ago.

"Once we did the scrying spell, Laurie told us he knew where you were and that he'd take care of it," Damon said as he pulled away. He raked his flop of brown hair back. "He's been keeping us updated in that vague, mysterious way of his. Then Lyari came by yesterday to tell us that you were at the Unseelie Court. We thought for sure you'd be home by this morning. What happened to your shoulder?"

"I probably shouldn't have come back at all," I admitted. "Oh, that's just a scratch. A small token from a confrontation with Queen Viessa. Did Laurie tell you who took—"

Damon's guest filled the doorway of his room, adjusting a starched collar. Now that I wasn't so distracted by his nudity, I was able to notice his features. He was uniquely handsome with those thick dark eyebrows, a narrow face, and a wide mouth. A shock went through me when I saw he wore the uniform of a deputy. But there hadn't been any squad cars in the driveway, and I knew every police officer in Granby…

Then I remembered that Laurie had recently created a vacancy in the department. *Oh. Right.* This human was probably a brand-new addition.

"Well, that's definitely not how I was hoping to meet my boyfriend's sister," the man said on a sheepish exhale. He walked past us, and the face of his watch caught the light as he reached for a coat hanging on one of the hooks.

"Boyfriend?" I echoed.

He glanced at Damon, who'd just started drinking from the glass of water I had abandoned. "I'm Danny," he said, offering his hand. "I'd stick around for a bit, but I've got the night shift. Perks of being a rookie, I guess. Are you hurt?"

His dark eyes lingered on my shoulder. Before I could come up with an excuse not to touch his bare hand, there was the unmistakable sound of a werewolf hurtling up the steps. I braced myself, but Finn didn't throw himself at me—instead, he walked a circle around me, his nostrils flaring and huffing. I stayed where I was, holding up my arms to make it easier for him, and held back yet another smile. "I'm fine, Finn. It's damn good to see you, too."

Emma appeared at the top of the stairs, a grocery bag in one arm and Matthew in the other. She spotted me instantly, our gazes meeting across the room, just as it had been with Damon. Matthew saw me a beat later, and he clapped his tiny hands together. Thankfully, my nephew didn't seem to notice my torn shoulder. "Tuna," he chirped happily.

Joy filled my lungs, making the next breath I took ragged and uneven. "Hey, Matt," I whispered.

This time, Damon didn't correct the nickname I'd given his son. Emma set the child down, and Matthew had only gotten two or three steps before I was there, plucking him off the floor like he weighed nothing. I cupped the back of his head and closed my eyes, breathing in his scent. It was the best smell in the entire world.

Matthew endured my tight embrace for exactly four seconds before he began to wriggle and kick his small legs. Letting him go felt like the hardest thing I'd ever done, and as I watched him toddle away, I felt a pinch of compassion for Savannah.

Damon knelt to take off his son's coat. I stared at the picture they made, thinking that my brother deserved to know that his ex was currently residing at the Unseelie Court.

Then Emma stepped into my line of vision, cutting my thoughts short. Without saying anything, she gathered me into a hug that smelled like cigarettes and frost. Though she was so much shorter, she managed to make me feel small and wholly enveloped. Finn's bright eyes tracked our movements as if he were worried I'd vanish any second.

"Welcome home," Emma said in my ear, her voice as warm as I remembered. "Your room is exactly as you left it. I did change the sheets and tidy up a little. What happened to your shoulder, sweetheart?"

I couldn't respond past the lump that had filled my throat, so I stopped trying. Seconds ticked by, and Emma didn't pull away. I didn't, either. Eventually I noticed a figure through Emma's wisps of blue hair, and I realized that Damon's new boyfriend still stood by the door. I swallowed and said, "It was nice to meet you, Danny."

"You, too," he said with a hint of humor. I didn't know anything about him, but somehow this human radiated quiet interest and real sincerity. He was… soft, like Damon used to be before Jassin altered him forever. Danny began to say something else, but his attention shifted to my brother, who had drawn close and spoke to him in a tender murmur.

Emma finally let me go after the door closed behind him. Though I wanted nothing more than to stay here and revel in being home, I needed to explain everything to my family and find the goblin ring hidden in my room. After that inevitably long conversation was over, Gil and Lyari would still be waiting outside. There was also one more person I needed to see once my new friend was settled at Adam's.

"Is Cyrus home?" I made myself ask.

Understanding flashed in Emma's eyes. *She knows, then,* I thought. Shame scraped my heart like a tattered fingernail. My hero was aware of what had happened just before Belanor took me. She'd learned that I had taken advantage of Cyrus's kind heart and asked him to do the unthinkable. It probably meant the rest of my family knew, as well.

But Emma didn't try to broach the topic. "He's at Bea's, I think," was all she said.

I'd figured—his truck wasn't in the driveway—but that hadn't stopped me from hoping. I owed my friend one hell of an apology.

That apology would have to come later, though. First I needed to focus on the goblin ring and telling the people I loved about Belanor, though every instinct in my body fought against recounting what he'd done. Maybe this could wait until tomorrow…

Mom's voice floated through my memory like a gentle admonishment. *No time like the present*.

"Will you gather everyone together?" I asked Emma, hiding how my insides quaked. "There's something we need to talk about. All of us."

Her brows rose with obvious curiosity, but she just nodded. Giving her a tight smile of gratitude, I turned and went into the bedroom I'd been sharing with Collith. At the threshold, I didn't pause or hesitate. That would allow the emotions to sink their claws in, and I couldn't be bleeding out while I stood in front of the others. I didn't even look toward the section of wall that had been repaired and painted.

The ring was where I'd left it. I steeled myself and slid the ugly piece of jewelry onto my middle finger. The spell on it must've been comparable to a glamour, because my features didn't physically shift or change. When I looked at the mirror, though, a stranger looked back. Her features were nondescript. I studied her and could've sworn I heard a voice whisper through my head. *Don't notice me. Don't see me.*

This could actually work. I removed the ring and clutched it in my fist, trying not to think about Gil's taunt. *I'll be here when you're finished telling your family what horrible danger you've put them in.*

Emma, Damon, and Finn were waiting in the living room, along with Lyari, I noted silently. She must've been listening from outside and deemed it safe to join us. I clasped my hands in front of me in case they started shaking. Matthew must've been put in his crib for the night, because a baby monitor glowed on the coffee table.

"Are you sure you don't want to get that looked at before we begin?" Emma asked, gesturing toward the marks on my shoulder.

I let out a short, anxious breath and shook my head. "Later. I'm not sure what Laurie has told all of you, but knowing him, it probably wasn't much. So I'll start with my first day at the Seelie Court."

I went on to tell them everything. Well, almost everything. I didn't give specifics on the tortures Belanor had inflicted upon me—in fact, I avoided saying his name as much as possible, because names held power for faeries. Especially ones that could sift, as Belanor probably could. I also didn't talk about the spell I'd performed myself, to survive Gil's transition into a newborn vampire. But my family learned of the spell Belanor was attempting, and what he'd done to Gil, and how he'd pitted me and Finn against each other. I ended my tale with a swift summary of my battle with the prince outside the palace.

"I'm not sure if His Highness will ever recover, but he did once before," I concluded. "It's possible he could come looking for me. The last thing I want is to put you all in danger, so if you don't like this idea, I understand."

"You're sure this ring works?" Lyari asked.

"You tell me." The clunky piece of jewelry was still clutched in my fingers, and I watched their faces closely as I put it back on. Emma and Damon both jumped. The corners of Lyari's mouth deepened, and she inclined her head as if she were impressed. I raised my eyebrows. "Do you think this will work? Is it enough to fool the prince, if he does wake up and search for me?"

For a moment, no one responded. Emma was the first to move. She pushed herself up, her bones audibly creaking, and closed the distance between us. She grasped my elbows in her palms and smiled up at me.

“The way I see it, we have two choices,” she said. “Either you use the ring, and we take the risk by staying, or all of us go. I’ll tell you what isn’t an option, though—you’re not leaving again. Not alone.”

Tears sprang to my eyes and Emma’s wrinkled face blurred. Blinking them back, I glanced behind her, wondering if everyone else agreed. Damon gave me a single nod. Lyari and Finn were stoic, but the steadiness of the werewolf’s gaze spoke volumes. I knew that if my Right Hand had anything to say, she would have. This silence was her way of offering support.

I cleared my throat and squeezed Emma’s arms before stepping back. It occurred to me that I hadn’t told them about the Rat King, or what Laurie and I had done at the Unseelie Court, but Gil was still waiting outside and I felt like a rag that had been wrung dry. “Well, then. I guess that settles it,” I said wearily. “If Belanor did survive, he’ll probably send spies to watch the house. We need to be careful. Avoid using my name or talking about the fact that I’m back. Emma, can I talk to you in the kitchen? Privately?”

“Of course.” The old woman followed me, and with that, our meeting came to an end. Damon went into his room to check on Matthew while Lyari began to fiddle with the TV remote, frowning. I resisted looking toward the big bed awaiting me, visible through the open door. *Soon,* I promised myself.

Once we reached the kitchen, I faced Emma again. It was futile to lower my voice, but I did anyway. “Lyari will be staying with us for a while. If she tries to leave, don’t let her. It’s just her pride.”

“Sounds like someone else I know. Are you heading into town with your friend? Gilbert, you said his name was?”

“I think he prefers Gil. But yes, I shouldn’t be gone long.”

“Before you do that, you may want to poke your head in there.” Emma pointed her thumb toward the end of the hall. I gave her a curious look of my own, but she didn’t offer an explanation. As I walked away I heard her tell Finn, “We seem to be running out of available beds. Maybe you and I should move back to the house, for the time being.”

He made a huffing sound that expressed how he felt about separating from me, but I was too distracted to feel any warmth or amusement. *Running out of beds?* I thought with a frown. The couch was a pullout, which meant we should’ve had enough. Maybe Emma didn’t know. I made

a mental note to tell her once I'd investigated whatever it was she wanted me to see.

The door at the end of the hall was slightly ajar. Thinking there would be no one on the other side, I pushed it open. I realized my mistake immediately, and a jolt of surprise went through my frame.

Nym stood near the window.

He looked drastically different from the last time I'd visited him. More… put together, although the clothes he wore were clearly Damon's. His shoulder-length hair had been recently washed and combed. I glanced at those pointed ears and thought of his fae hearing. He must've been listening to everything we'd discussed in the living room. If Nym felt anything about my return, though, or the potential threat Belanor represented, he didn't show it. The faerie's nose was pressed to the glass, both of his hands flattened against it.

I started to wonder what he was doing here, and a memory filled my head before the thought had fully formed. *Nym… would you like to come live with me?*

Truth be told, I'd forgotten about the offer I made that night. I had just killed everyone at the black market and confronted Collith about his dark secret, so my state of mind hadn't exactly been clear or stable.

The same could be said for Nym, yet he clearly hadn't forgotten our conversation. In the brief time he'd been here, the faerie had made this space his own. The walls were covered in artwork, pages and pages, the top edge of every paper jagged from where it had been ripped from a sketchbook. Looking at the images, I remembered that Collith had once spoken of Nym drawing me.

The question was, why was he still doing it?

Realizing that he wouldn't be able to see my real face—or whatever face he saw when he looked at me—I took off the ring and put it in my pocket. A quake of trepidation went through me as I started forward. The faerie didn't move or say a word at the sound of my approach. Once I was close enough I said softly, "Hi, Nym."

Even now, he didn't turn or meet my gaze. "My lady. Everyone has been so worried about you," he murmured.

I studied Nym's profile. He stared at the darkened trees with an expression of intense thought. His face was tinted with yellow light, along

with the rest of the room. It was deceptive, because it made everything seem serene.

I pulled out of my thoughts, realizing that Nym was trying to say something. His mouth moved, but the words were so quiet I couldn't hear. Still fighting a sense of unease, I tucked my hair behind my ear and leaned closer.

"…can do it," Nym was whispering. "I can do it. I can do it."

Without warning, he whirled to face me. I couldn't help but take a step back. Nym's palm became a fist against the window, and his gaze was so heated that it burned holes in me. My heart pounded.

"What's the point of having wings if I can't fly?" the faerie demanded, veins standing out in his pale forehead.

I held onto my guise of neutrality, every word I uttered slow and deliberate. "I don't know, Nym."

Something about this made the faerie blink. Maybe it was hearing his name out loud and being reminded of who he was. His palm was still fused to the window, and, slowly, Nym's attention slid away from me and back to the unreachable beyond. "My wings are beautiful, aren't they?" he murmured.

As if to taunt him, a black bird swooped into view, casting a shadow over us. I tracked it with my eyes for a moment, biting my lip against a pang of sympathy. What a special torment it was, to carry the marks of wings on your body for all eternity. To remember what it had felt like to have them.

"Yes, they are, Nym. Very beautiful," I said softly.

Once again, my response seemed to calm him, and I watched Nym's wild eyes go dull with sorrow. His voice was childlike again as he asked, "What do they look like?"

For a moment I considered telling him the awful truth—that he had no wings. That he was nothing but a scrambled shadow of a person. But I couldn't do it. If we didn't have hope, what else was there?

Instead, I offered him the pretty lies he yearned for. "They look like light. Such strong, pure light. I've never seen its equal before, so nothing can compare."

I stopped, holding my breath. Nym didn't react. Had I gone too far? For a moment, I worried I should've described the human cliché for wings, frilly-looking adornments of white feathers and a bird-like shape… but

then Nym smiled, a dreamy curve of the lips. As if it was a gift, what I had given him. Such a small thing; I'd simply fed his illusion. If I were in his place, was that what I would've wanted?

Making a mental note to speak with the rest of my family about Nym, because they should've gotten a vote before I made an unpredictable faerie our new roommate, I went back to the door. I opened it just as his voice sounded behind me.

"Queen Fortuna?"

With one hand on the doorknob, I glanced over my shoulder. Nym hadn't moved from his place beside the window, and at this angle, this moment, he looked like a painting or a story brought to life. Strands of his hair caught the dying light. "Yes?"

His tone became flawlessly polite. A courtier's way of speaking, especially the older ones. "May I trouble you for a clock?"

The request sent a swirl of worry through me, like leaves disturbed by a gust of wind. I remembered his rooms from the Unseelie Court. All those clocks broken and shattered. The ticking forever silenced, as if Nym had been desperate to make time stop. Out loud I said, "It's no trouble at all. I'll pick one when the stores are open."

He dipped his head. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

"You can just call me Fortuna, you know," I remarked.

Nym just turned away, as if he hadn't heard me at all. It was obvious from his slack expression that his mind had gone to another place again. No doubt it was a memory from his long, extraordinary life, images and events that spanned back to the beginning of time. Seeing the awed haze in Nym's eyes, I almost envied his ability to escape into such a whimsical world.

A time when people had wings and could lift into the sky without a second thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I arrived at the dreamscape in the midst of a snowstorm.

Wind and cold battered at the makeshift walls. I pushed myself up slowly, scanning the glowing space for Oliver. He knelt beside the tent flaps, peering out at the squall. A howling, frigid gust stirred locks of his golden hair and made one half of his face white as the snow blowing past.

"Welcome back," Oliver said, sparing me a glance. Even that brief look betrayed the worry in his eyes.

I smiled, thinking of how relieved he'd be to hear that I was finally home. "Good to be back. Should we—"

"What is that?" Oliver asked, his voice sharp.

His blue eyes had gone to my shoulder. Looking down, I realized my wound was slightly peeking out from the unbuttoned collar of my shirt. Strange that it had come into the dreamscape with me. The marks were already beginning to scab over, and I felt nothing as I tugged my shirt to cover them. "Oh, this? Just a parting gift from the new Unseelie Queen."

"A *parting* gift?" Oliver echoed, raising his eyebrows.

In response, I left the warmth of the nest we'd made and started putting clothes into my backpack. As I rolled my sleeping bag up, I talked about everything that had transpired since last night. My bizarre conversation with Viessa, breaking Collith out, reuniting with my family. I still didn't mention what Laurie and I had done.

And Oliver, though he must've felt some of it while it was happening, didn't ask.

This time, my telling only took a minute or so, and it felt like the first time I had a semi-optimistic ending. I'd gotten so used to hardship and

grief that the words tasted like a lie in my mouth. But they were the truth—besides the conversation I still needed to have with Cyrus, all was well in the real world. Adam had taken in Gil without hesitation. Damon had forgiven me, and he was actually happy.

It was a strange feeling, knowing that everyone I loved was safe. For now, at least. If Belanor ever woke up, I had to be ready.

Just as I had been with my family, I was honest with Oliver about the potential danger. He didn't ask any questions, and the worry in his eyes had only gotten brighter. I knew if Oliver wanted to talk about it, he would. But I didn't need to ask what he was so concerned about—me. It was always me, no matter how strained things might be between us now. Quiet filled the tent, and my mind wandered as we continued preparations for the next part of our journey.

"Lightsabers," I said suddenly, raising my head in a burst of excitement.

Oliver rubbed his eye, and his jaw flexed as if he were on the verge of a yawn. "What?"

I didn't answer; I was too busy staring at him. Realizing there might be another reason for his silence. In all the years we'd known each other, I couldn't recall ever seeing Oliver like this. Drained. Lined. Exhausted. What if… what if there had been other changes, other consequences to the shifts in the dreamscape? For as long as he'd existed, Oliver had never needed to sleep. But seeing him now, I suspected it was another way he was being affected by the fluctuating rules of this place. Why hadn't he slept while I was gone?

The answer came to me instantly—because Oliver had been entirely alone in the tent, and thanks to me, monsters roamed these lands. If he'd allowed himself to fall asleep, there would've been no one to keep watch. No one to protect him while he was vulnerable.

Guilt struck my heart like a mallet to a cymbal. I was starting to get used to the terrible feeling, though, and I made sure Oliver didn't see any outward signs of it.

Realizing that I still hadn't responded to him, I cleared my throat. "Why haven't we ever used lightsabers? They'd probably be way more efficient than swords or guns."

Oliver considered this. He drew the zipper across the top of his bag. "Do you know how long it would take me to make that? The more detailed

the object, the more time I have to spend on it."

"Fine, party pooper. It was just an idea." I turned away, muttering under my breath, "A really good one."

Oliver shook his head, but he couldn't quite hide the grin tugging at his mouth. Feeling lighter, I finished tying the laces on my boots. Oliver stepped outside, and after one more glance around, I followed him.

Snow and wind blew into my face, surprisingly vicious. I tugged and adjusted my scarf until only my eyes were exposed. Oliver did the same. We made short work of disassembling our small shelter, no easy feat when one was wearing thick gloves. Less than five minutes later, the two of us put our backpacks on again, now laden with pieces of the tent. In unspoken agreement, we put our heads down and plunged into the storm.

With the wind moaning past our ears, attempting a conversation would be pointless. Unfortunately, there was also nothing much in the way of a view. I was forced to watch my feet and count each step to keep my thoughts from running rampant. Every now and then, I looked up to see how much distance we'd covered. It was always much less than I expected.

This is taking forever, I thought with an irritated frown. I was the one who'd made this world, so why couldn't I cross it with a snap of my fingers or a simple impulse?

If I'd been secretly hoping for some kind of answer, I didn't get one. There was just the moaning wind and the miles of raging snow. I scowled and bent my face toward the ground again.

We were five or six hours into the hike, by my guess, the gray sky beginning to go black, when something did appear through the snow—a thin bit of darkness that didn't move or disappear. My heart quickened and I squinted my eyes. It was a river, I realized with disappointment. Part of me had hoped it was another memory. I followed the river's length as far as I could see in this whiteout, and it seemed to lead directly into the mountains we were aiming for.

"Fortuna," Oliver said, his voice hard and urgent.

We'd been in danger enough times now that I'd learned to recognize that tone. My stomach sank as I turned, following Oliver's grim stare. For an instant, I could only gape at the sight and think, *We are so royally fucked.*

It was a massive horde. Not quite the size of an army, but close enough.

Minotaurs.

They'd started to surround us, using the storm for cover. With the head of a bull and the body of a man, they looked like something that belonged in Hell. Every one of them held a double-bladed ax in its bare fists, and their corded, muscular torsos were barely protected from the snow by scraps of threadbare-looking clothes, like something from the Stone Age.

Oliver and I reached for our weapons at the same time. Each of us now held a handgun and a knife, but the knife felt woefully inadequate as I eyed the massive size of the beasts coming toward us. Two minotaurs marched several yards ahead of the others, and I suspected it was because they were slightly smaller, and therefore, faster.

"Bet those lightsabers are looking pretty great now, huh?" I said under my breath.

"If we survive this, I'll make you a green one, and I'll also get a tattoo that says *Fortuna was right* on my ass. What do we know about minotaurs?" Oliver added, keeping his eyes on the one closest to him.

I smiled humorlessly. "We know they're carnivores."

"Great."

My mind raced, driven by the hard edge of desperation. These things may have been carnivores, but they were still shaped like men—maybe there was enough of a human psyche for me to use. Hardly daring to hope, I gave my power an experimental flex. But I couldn't feel a single mind or consciousness, and there were no flavors on my tongue. Hope shriveled as quickly as it had grown.

Just like the ceti, these creatures were immune to my abilities.

I had enough time to swear before one of the smaller minotaurs was on me, swinging its enormous head. I leaped back to avoid both the ax and its horns, aiming my gun at its face, but I didn't see the creature's gigantic fist coming around until an instant before it hit me. The *strength* of it was staggering. I flew backward, air rushing from my lungs in a painful wheeze. Oliver's gun sounded as I slammed into the ice, landing on my hip and shoulder. Pain shot through me, but I was only aware of it for an instant. Then the adrenaline took over and I rolled to my feet, snow clinging to half of my face. Burning like white fire.

Oliver had already caught up with me, carrying all of our weapons. The two smaller minotaurs both lay dead where they'd first caught up with us. I couldn't help but be impressed. *Go, Ollie*. As I took my knife and gun

back, I darted an automatic glance toward him, assuming he'd be fine—we trained together often, and I had taught Oliver everything I knew from Adam and my father. But the other small minotaur must've nicked him, because there was blood covering the back of his hand. Running out of his coat sleeve from a wound I couldn't see. His coat was too dark, too thick.

"How bad is it?" I asked.

"We need to retreat," Oliver said through his teeth, walking backward to keep his sights on the army of minotaurs still coming. "We might have a chance if we can get the river at our backs."

My eyes dropped to his hands, which were plastered against his side and covered in blood. "Can you run?"

As an answer, Oliver launched in the direction of the river.

The minotaurs bellowed, and thunder shook the air as I bolted after him, my lungs prickling with every frantic inhale. I scanned the river and tried not to focus on the futility of Oliver's plan. But we both knew that getting to a stretch of water wouldn't save us. Swimming across it wasn't an option, either—there could be lethal currents, or one of us might succumb to hypothermia, depending on how cold it was.

Wait a minute, I thought, frowning against the torrent of snow. Why were we running for our lives? Why were we in any danger at all?

This was *my* fucking dream.

Power and resolve blazed through me. I skidded to a halt and spun back around, facing the oncoming swarm. As I turned, I pocketed the knife and the gun—I wouldn't be needing them. My hands formed into fists. I had one of those moments, again, when time slowed down and every sense heightened. Oliver's voice sounded far away as he demanded, "Fortuna, what are you *doing*?"

I ignored him. Just as I'd done when I was fighting Oliver's shadow, I squeezed my eyes shut and channeled everything I felt into a chant. *Open. Open. Open.* I imagined the ground beneath the minotaurs exploding with a world-shaking sound, snow and dirt flying in every direction. I pictured the creatures falling into a shuddering crevice of darkness and lava. *Open. Open. Open.* I envisioned the place where the army had once stood as a smoldering hole of snow and silence.

Nothing happened.

My eyes snapped open, refocusing on the dark line of approaching minotaurs. I wanted to release a scream of frustration.

At that moment, I knew. I knew we couldn't win this. They were too strong, and we were outnumbered. That didn't mean I was about to go down without a fight, though. We'd stick with Oliver's feeble plan. I glanced over my shoulder to gauge our distance from the river, but there was something else behind us now. I frowned, struggling to make out details through the storm. An instant later, my eyes widened.

Was that… a ship?

It was. There was a ship, or more accurately, a *ferry* floating along the river.

I didn't question it. That could come later. A new plan formed, swift and sloppy. My head swiveled from the ferry to the creatures surrounding us on every other side. Could minotaurs swim?

We were about to find out. This was the only option left, save for letting them eat us.

Uttering a silent scrap of a prayer, I snatched Oliver's hand and ran again, ignoring it when he almost lost his footing. He recovered and matched my speed. I knew when Oliver spotted the ferry, because he made a sound of surprise. We sprinted, full-out, toward the night-blackened water. Our backpacks slammed against our spines.

Then we were flying, our arms swinging. The river was too wide—we didn't even come close to the ferry. For that split second we were mid-air, I braced myself for the shock of agonizing cold. But when the water closed over my head, surrounding me on all sides, I felt my eyes widen again at the unexpected warmth.

Nothing about this place made sense.

What if the ceti are here, too? I thought with mounting panic. *What if this is the Styx?*

I broke through the surface with a gasp, kicking instantly for the ferry. Oliver was right beside me. As we swam, my mind buzzed with fear and voices. One of them was my mother's, her passion-filled words rising and falling with the cadence of a story. In Greek mythology, the Styx River separated the living from the dead. Maybe this water wasn't full of murderous seal hybrids, but some delightful souls instead, trapped in limbo and doomed to float these dark currents for eternity.

Just as I finished *that* fun thought, Oliver and I reached the boat. It was easy enough to haul ourselves on board, since the sides were strangely shallow, scooped like a cardboard box gone soft. I looked for any sign of

the ferryman, Charon, but we were alone. There was nothing else within the space, not even a coil of rope.

In the time it had taken to jump into the river and climb aboard, the blizzard had slowed. Snowflakes flitted past and the wind plucked at strands of my hair like a curious child. Oliver and I got to our feet, wanting to keep the minotaurs within sight. Water dripped from the hems of our coats and off our sleeves, some of it pink from Oliver's blood. I darted a glance at his torso again, already thinking of what I could use to wrap it and staunch the bleeding. Movement on shore drew my gaze back outward—one of the thick-chested beasts stood closer to the water than the others. It watched us float away, its head cocked, as though it were considering something.

Then it took a running leap.

I recoiled instinctively, and the minotaur's momentum got it all the way to the ferry's edge. Before I could recover or dart forward, Oliver was there, hacking at its hands. His knife left deep gouges in the creature's flesh. It bellowed and released the boat without thinking. *Not very intelligent, apparently,* I thought faintly. When the minotaur began to sink, it realized its mistake and desperately scrabbled at a shelf of ice that extended partway over the rushing water. But the ice broke, and the bawling creature sank beneath the dark surface within seconds. The current wiped away any ripples in an instant.

I supposed that answered the question of whether or not minotaurs could swim.

None of the beasts on shore moved to save their comrade, and something told me there wouldn't be any more attempts to reach us. I heaved a sigh and lowered myself to the deck, resting my back against the shallow wall. My entire body ached. The ferry creaked and moaned onward.

Though the threat of the minotaurs had passed, Oliver stayed where he was, his forearm resting on one propped knee. There was blood sprayed across his throat and chin, and he still held his knife. With the moon rising behind him, the pale light bouncing off ice and water, the moment felt like a dream of a dream.

Feeling my gaze, Oliver twisted slightly. "Are you all right?" he asked, his eyes scanning me.

"I could ask you the same thing. Also, who *are* you?" I joked.

It didn’t sound like a joke, though, and Oliver knew me too well. “I’m finally figuring that out,” he said.

His tone, along with the way he was looking at me, made my smile fade. I looked back at Oliver, noting the changes in him for the hundredth time since we’d been reunited. The faint bridge of freckles was the same, the blueness of his eyes, too, but there was a hardness to his features that —

Something strange appeared in my peripheral vision, a splash of color that didn’t belong. Expecting to see another terrifying creature trying to kill us, I jerked my head up. In the same breath, I reached into my pocket for the gun. But then I faltered, and I stared at the scene with a puzzled frown.

It was a… door. It stood near the shore, with no walls on either side or anything else to hold it upright. As if the door had come out of the ground, fully formed, a piece of wood that had been painted red.

And my parents were walking toward it.

A memory, I thought with a dim sense of shock, jumping to my feet. I was looking at a memory. But my parents looked so solid. So real. If I were to wrap my arms around them, would I feel it? Would I relive the scents that had once clung to their skin, their clothes?

The younger version of me was there, too. She walked next to Dad, on his left. It must’ve been warm, wherever they were, because the other Fortuna wore a pretty white sundress, the cotton dotted with blue flowers. Her small features were curious and alert. She didn’t matter, though, not compared to the people she walked alongside. I gave my father a wistful, yearning glance before I turned my complete focus on Christine Sworn. I drank her in like a person dying of thirst.

My mother had been tall for a woman—nearly six feet. But she didn’t try to make herself appear smaller, or anything less than what she was. Her chestnut hair, my hair, was secured at the back of her head with a clip. She wore a dress with a buckle cinched around her generous waist, and stylish black boots on her feet. She knocked on the red door firmly, her head held high, eyes clear.

The sound of that knock jarred me from the spell I’d been under. My breathing lurched. Frantic, I searched for a way to stop the ferry. But, as I’d noticed when we first climbed on, there was nothing but the smooth wooden bottom and the bowed walls. Jumping out wasn’t an option—the

minotaurs were still following on that side of the river. We could swim to the other side, but then we'd lose the advantage of the ferry. The river was so wide that I probably wouldn't be able to make out a word they said, anyway. Standing there, I felt my stomach drop as I came to the inevitable conclusion.

We had to stay on board, and I'd only get one chance to watch this memory play out.

Oliver moved to stand next to me. He didn't make a sound, as if he'd figured it out, too. The ferry drew close enough to the door that I could see the knob now, glinting gold in the moonlight. The red door opened, and a dark-haired woman stepped into view. A man appeared beside her. Dad greeted them, and I stopped breathing, unwilling to let it threaten my ability to hear. My parents' voices floated across the water, and it felt like my heart was in my throat.

"…has to be a way to stop it," Matthew Sworn was saying, his voice tinged with a desperation I'd never heard from him before. "Here you are, standing in front of us. Please, Tamar. We need your help."

The woman had started shaking her head before he finished speaking. "No, the price is too high. You don't know what you're asking. I won't deny that there is a way, but it requires pain. The sort of pain that can never be forgotten. Worse than childbirth, or amputation, or burns. He can attest to it better than anyone."

"Her power grows by the day," my mother put in. Hearing her familiar, husky voice after so many years was such a distraction that I almost missed it when she added, "We wouldn't have come if there were any other way. But… this is life or death, Tamar. No price is too high."

Silence swelled between the adults. Slowly, the woman's dark eyes dropped to me. The other me, who stood in front of my father. His hands rested on her skinny shoulders, and our parents must not have explained anything to her, because younger Fortuna's eyebrows were knitted with confusion. The fact that she didn't ask any questions was a testament to the tension in the air.

"How old is she?" Tamar asked finally, her voice soft.

Dad's fingers curled around young Fortuna's shoulders. It was a reflexive, protective gesture. "Seven."

The woman stared at me for several more seconds, as if she could learn who I was just by peering into my eyes. The man at her side didn't say a

word through any of this, and I was about to examine him more closely when Tamar spoke again. Her voice was heavy with resignation as she said, “I may know a coven that will help you. I can give you a phone number. They don’t deal in texts or calls—you’ll have to leave a voicemail. Don’t give your name, and don’t ask for theirs. Ever. Speaking a name out loud gives it power, and we don’t need to make it easier for him.”

Easier for him? I echoed silently, frowning. What did she mean? What did *any* of this mean? Was Tamar a witch? My parents were thanking her, relief shining from their faces. I rushed to the other end of the ferry, never taking my eyes off their distant figures. I was desperate for answers. But we were too far away now, and I couldn’t hear anything beyond the whistling wind.

Even though they hadn’t been real, it felt like I was losing my parents all over again. I stared toward that red door, holding the railing in a painfully tight grip, and Oliver filled the space beside me. I didn’t acknowledge him. An ache started in the center of my chest and spread outward. I’d forgotten, I thought, how beautiful my mother was.

Blinking the pain back, I looked down. My gaze flicked to Oliver’s hand, where I’d seen blood earlier. The water had washed it away, leaving the skin smooth and clean. His wound couldn’t be too deep, then, if it had already stopped bleeding. I took a shuddering breath and peered up at his face, thinking to ask Oliver for his perspective on the memory we’d just witnessed. But his attention was fixed farther downshore, a line deepening between his thick brows. I followed his gaze.

In the distance, the minotaurs had come to a complete stop. The storm was thickening again, and the sight they made through the snow was eerie and unnerving, somehow. Maybe it was their utter stillness, or how their expressions had gone blank, as if the absence of a quarry had switched something off inside them. I frowned at the minotaurs for another moment, now tiny figures in the distance. Then, slowly, my hands fell away from the railing. I let out a long sigh, and some of the tension left my shoulders. God, it had been a long day. A frustrating day.

“This seems like as good a place as any to get some sleep,” Oliver said, probably because he’d heard my sigh. “We’re not going to see anything else until this snow clears and we have a little light.”

“It doesn’t make sense, feeling tired in a dream,” I mumbled. But I took off my backpack in unspoken agreement.

Oliver didn’t respond. We began putting up the tent, removing the pieces from our bags one by one. The backpacks must’ve been waterproof, because nothing was wet, like I’d expected it all to be. As I snapped the metal rods into place, I mentally reviewed the fight with the minotaurs. I should’ve been thinking about the scene with my parents, and yet, I didn’t want to.

I was afraid to.

So I thought about the minotaurs. Why had they attacked us? Why were they even in the dreamscape? *You’re missing something*, my instincts insisted. There was an obvious detail I was missing. A pattern I wasn’t seeing.

Another piece of the tent snapped into place within my hands. I stared down at it, frowning in thought. When I finally made the connection, it felt like I was in a roller coaster car, plunging into the first freefall.

They were guarding something.

“*Fuck*. This is going to be harder than we thought. Fuck,” I repeated, feeling like I could fall asleep the moment I stretched out in my sleeping bag. I lifted my head and caught Oliver’s questioning look. He hadn’t put it together, I realized. He’d probably been so focused on keeping me safe that he hadn’t been able to think about much else.

“The minotaurs were guarding the memory,” I told him. “Trying to keep us from reaching it. That’s why they stopped like that, and stood in a line once we reached a certain point—we’d gotten far enough away from the memory. Something tells me that’s going to be the case for all of them. It’s why the ceti were there, too, at the last memory we saw. I’m not sure why the tree one wasn’t guarded, though. Maybe it wasn’t significant enough.”

Oliver’s brow lowered, a strand of hair blowing into his eye. The tent popped up between us a moment later, and he came back around to me, making adjustments as he went. “But this is your own mind,” Oliver said once he was close enough. “Wouldn’t these creatures recognize you? Why are there things guarding your memories at all?”

It was a question I’d already asked myself, and I hadn’t liked the answer. Oliver would probably be even more unhappy about it. Gathering

my courage, I inclined my head toward the flaps, and Oliver nodded. We both retrieved our backpacks and ducked inside.

“I think I used my mother’s stories, and this dreamscape, as a way to forget my childhood trauma,” I said, resuming our conversation. I undid the clasps on my sleeping bag while Oliver pulled the space heater out. We were so attuned to each other that our movements were like a choreographed dance. “I may want to remember now, but my subconscious hasn’t gotten the memo—it’s still trying to do what I told it to all those years ago.”

Oliver frowned in thought. He flicked the switch on the heater, and that darkened square slowly filled with a warm glow. Outside, I could hear the wind picking up again. “Do you believe it would keep guarding your memories, even if you were hurt?” Oliver asked.

He’d avoided saying the words, but I knew what he was really asking. *Can pursuing these memories get you killed?* Stalling again, I set my weapons out to dry and pulled off my drenched, chilled coat. Despite my reluctance, I didn’t want to lie to Oliver anymore. Lies were like little seeds scattered throughout the foundation of a relationship. Time and silence allowed them to sprout into vines that eventually broke and crumbled everything.

I turned to Oliver and saw that he’d taken his wet clothes off. Wearing only a pair of boxer briefs, he knelt on the other side of our makeshift bed. There was a cut on his rib cage, but it didn’t look big enough to require stitches. Following his lead, I removed my own sopping shirt, then sat to tug off my fleece-lined leggings. Now as naked as he was—there were newly-formed bruises along my body from hitting the ground so hard—I met Oliver’s gaze, keeping mine steady to hide the shiver traveling down my spine.

“If I was frightened enough to hide my past behind sea monsters and minotaurs, I’m not sure there’s anything my mind wouldn’t do to keep me from it,” I answered at last.

I waited for arguments or protests. I’d also steeled myself for questions about the memory itself, and the things my parents had said. *There has to be a way to stop it. Her power grows by the day. Life or death. No price is too high.*

Instead, Oliver slid into the sleeping bag and, without missing a beat, pulled me closer to him. I didn’t resist, and he tucked me against his hard

body as if I were small and breakable. I felt his fingers linger near the wound Viessa put on my shoulder. Our conversation didn't feel over, but neither of us wanted to continue it. *Tomorrow's problem,* I told myself. We'd talk about this tomorrow.

Because, no matter how badly I wanted to learn more about Tamar and why my parents had gone to her, I wasn't sure I was willing to risk our lives for it.

"Ollie?" I said, speaking in a whisper. The tent walls snapped.

"Yeah, Fortuna?"

"Don't keep watch tonight. Just sleep. Okay?"

He paused. Then he said, "Okay."

Within minutes, another storm howled outside the glowing nook we'd made for ourselves. But the ferry's gentle sway was soothing, rather than disconcerting. Oliver's breathing had already slowed in my ear. I nestled deeper into the sleeping bag, feeling safer than I had in days. Little by little, the tension left my body.

With my back pressed to Oliver's chest, his warmth keeping the icy night at bay, I closed my eyes. For the first time in weeks, since the day I'd learned Collith's terrible secret, burned away my soul, and found myself whisked away to the Seelie Court, I fell asleep knowing that I was safe, in this world and the next. I was in Ollie's arms.

I was home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The first beams of light poked their way through the cracks in my window blinds.

I peered toward the glass through my eyelashes, sleepily admiring how morning had spread its arms and embraced the trees. It felt too good to be true, waking up in this bed, surrounded by my family. But I didn't let myself question it. Instead, I burrowed deeper into the mattress and pulled the covers tighter against me. If this was a trick or a dream, I didn't have the will to fight it. A drowsy, contented smile curved my lips.

That smile faded too quickly. Even though I'd just spent weeks being tortured, and I could use time to recuperate, my mind inevitably turned to thoughts of rent and energy bills, groceries and baby clothes. Damon and I had some savings, but it would only last a few more months at most. I refused to ask Emma for help—she'd already given so much and made too many sacrifices. I couldn't depend on the small salary I'd been receiving as the Unseelie Queen, either.

Damn it, Fortuna. I was frowning now, my eyebrows knitted together. I really, really should've given it more thought before handing the throne to Viessa. Unless I wanted to drive Nym further past the brink of sanity, I'd have to live with my impetuous decision.

I was so consumed with worry that I didn't realize someone had entered my room until a small, soft finger touched my cheek. Startled, I cracked one eye open and found myself staring at Matthew. His small face loomed near mine, his eyes wide and curious. He wore long john pajamas that were covered in polar bears, their red scarves flapping like a cheery wave.

“Hey, bug,” I whispered, smiling again. This one was so wide that it hurt, and suddenly my heart felt lighter, as if it had become the window lit up with all that sunlight. “Don’t tell anyone, but I missed you the most.”

Matthew held something in front of my face. The tiny object caught the light, and the silver it was made of glinted. “Mine,” he said.

I glanced at my finger, already knowing I’d find it bare. Little thief.

“This is called a ring,” I said, gently taking it from his sticky fingers. “We need to be very, very careful with it. Okay?”

Giggling, my nephew whirled and ran, moving much faster than he’d been able to the last time I’d seen him. He left the door ajar, making it easier to hear sounds drifting from the rest of the loft. Damon and Emma’s voices went back and forth. Something sizzled and fried in a pan. Matthew’s bare feet slapped against the wooden floor.

It was a lullaby I could’ve listened to all day long, but I didn’t have that luxury. Swallowing a reluctant sigh, I put the ring back on and pushed the covers aside. My feet landed on the plush rug Collith had chosen. Grimacing, I leaned forward and turned the bedside lamp on, adding its glow to the streams of pink and gold coming from outside. I looked around, searching for my nameless kitten, but she’d apparently grown accustomed to this room being empty.

“Finish your breakfast, kid,” Damon called suddenly. The words echoed, which meant he was in the other bathroom. “We’re leaving in fifteen minutes!”

It was the motivation I needed to leave the bed. I finally stood up, and part of me expected to be sore after everything I’d been through in Germany, not to mention the injuries I’d gained during Collith’s jailbreak. But Maria’s healing and using my abilities had made me good as new. There was even a tiny bounce in my step as I padded into the small but lavish bathroom Collith had designed for us.

Minutes later, I reemerged wrapped in a towel. A cloud of steam followed me as I went to the closet and tugged at the double doors. The moment they opened, I discovered that all of Collith’s clothes were still there. Any lingering remnants of my smile promptly vanished. I should’ve expected it—after all, I had magically banished my ex from the barn, and he’d been taken prisoner a day later. He hadn’t exactly had an opportunity to pack.

Of its own volition, my hand lifted and touched one of the wool sweaters hanging there. I had a sudden, inexplicable urge to lean forward and press my face against it. As if there were memories clinging to the material, Collith's voice murmured into the stillness. *For me, you were never a Nightmare, Fortuna Sworn—you were a dream come to life.*

Thinking of that last day we'd spent together, I gave in to the impulse and reached for the sweater as if it were the person it belonged to.

At the exact instant my fingertips made contact with the wool, I heard Viessa's voice, too. *Every time Collith has sex, he takes a piece of his partner. Just a tiny piece. You hardly would've noticed its absence*.

My fingers closed into a fist. I drew back and closed one of the doors, hiding Collith's clothes from view. I imagined the heart inside me transforming into a diamond, cold and hard and glittering. Tight-lipped, I pulled a pair of jeans off the shelf, along with a long-sleeved shirt, and closed the other door a bit too hard.

As the shirt settled into place, I saw instantly that I'd lost weight during my time at the Seelie Court. I had already been too thin from all those runs through the woods and not eating enough. I'd have to make some changes now that I was back. Fighting Belanor had resurrected my desire not only to survive, but to *live*. From this point on, I wanted things to be different. Better. With a fresh surge of resolve, I yanked the jeans on, noting the bagginess of those, as well.

Taking a breath, I raked my damp hair back and headed for that open doorway.

The first thing I noticed was the aroma of fresh coffee. The second thing was Lyari, and her presence made me falter in surprise. She sat at the kitchen island, looking out of place and decidedly uncomfortable. *Emma probably forced her to*, I thought.

It was also likely that Emma had forced the fierce warrior to borrow some of her clothes. Considering there was at least a six-inch height difference between them, the old woman's jeans looked like capri pants on Lyari's tall frame. I'd only seen her remove her armor once before, and without it, the faerie made me think of a cat dropped in a bathtub. At least her braid was the same; it hung down her back in a thick, gleaming rope.

Recovering, I finished crossing the space and climbed onto the stool next to my friend. I wasn't sure why I'd expected her to be gone by the time I woke up—maybe because that was how it had always been. But now

she had nowhere to go. When she'd sided with me and fought against Viessa, defecting from the Unseelie Court, Lyari had sacrificed everything she held dear. Including a place to live.

Guilt expanded in my throat like a sponge filling with water, and I hastily fixed my attention on the other details of this place I'd missed so much. This place I had fought so hard to return to.

There was no sign of Finn, which probably meant that he'd gone on a hunt. Nym wasn't there, either, but the door to his bedroom was tightly closed. Emma stood in front of the coffee maker, of course. She wore her old robe and her blue hair was still in rollers. At the sound of my weight settling on the stool, she turned. My muscles tensed as I braced myself for sympathy or more questions about Belanor.

"Good morning! What are your plans this week, now that you're safe at home?" Emma questioned. Her demeanor was warm but brisk. She slid a cup of coffee across the island, and she gave me a fleeting smile before presenting her back again. She retrieved a spatula from the counter and her arm moved as she attended to something on the stove. It smelled like bacon.

Trying not to appear relieved, I cupped my hands around the coffee mug. Its heat seeped into my palms. I lifted one shoulder in a shrug and said, "I'll ask Bea to put me back on the schedule, I guess. If she hasn't fired me by now. I haven't exactly been a consistent employee these past few months. Do you need help with anything? We should be waiting on you, Ems, not the other way around."

"I already tried that," Lyari muttered.

Ignoring both of us, Emma set a plate down beside my hand, then did the same for the faerie next to me. "But what about the goblin ring?" she asked. "If you're wearing it, Bea won't know who you are."

"I thought of that. It's probably time to tell her the truth, anyway. About everything." I stared down at the pancakes and bacon Emma had made, oddly emotional at the sight. After a few seconds, I noticed how a trickle of melted butter ran into a pool of syrup. My stomach rumbled, and I remembered that I hadn't eaten since leaving the Unseelie Court. Succumbing to the hunger, I picked up a fork resting against the edge of the plate and dug in. Lyari followed suit, but with notably less enthusiasm.

"I think that's a good idea. She's been worried sick since you disappeared from the hospital. Maybe you should give Consuelo a call,

too," Emma added, still using a casual, offhand tone that wasn't fooling anyone. She returned to the stove and flipped another pancake.

Stalling for time, I took a sip of coffee. It had been sweetened with milk and sugar, exactly how I liked it. I took a few extra beats to swallow before I responded, matching Emma's nonchalance, "Actually, I'm done with therapy."

"I think I shall go for a walk," Lyari announced. Without further comment, she shoved her stool back, got to her feet, and hurried toward the stairwell. I rolled my eyes at her retreating back. *Coward*. As the door closed behind her, I moved to drag her plate across the counter. If she didn't plan to eat it, I would.

"I can't wait to break down *that* one's walls," Emma said. I believed her—there was a gleam of anticipation in her eyes.

Stalling again, I pretended to be absorbed by the food in front of me. The conversation about Lyari was inevitable, though. If she was going to be living with us, the others should know what leaving the Unseelie Court truly meant for her. The potential risk involved. I didn't plan on letting Lyari deteriorate into a goblin, but I wasn't taking any chances. Not with Matthew in the picture. Resigned, I opened my mouth to tell Emma, but the old woman spoke first.

"Your parents don't know that you've been missing, by the way," she said. "I left that up to Damon, but I don't think he could bring himself to tell Maureen."

It was no mystery why. When Damon disappeared, Maureen had become a different person for a while. A sad creature with hollow cheeks and a dull look in her eyes. "I'm glad he didn't tell them."

"So… you don't intend to go back to Consuelo?" Emma asked, taking a bite from the plate she'd prepared for herself.

The question made me pause. My gaze dropped back down to Lyari's half-eaten pancakes. For an instant, I saw flashes from the night that had sent me to Consuelo in the first place. Bare branches overhead. A black sky.

But those images gave way to different ones, fragments from another night. A crackling fire. Bare skin. Silver hair and long fingers. The panic that had been edging in slowly retreated, like fog evaporating beneath the luminescent rays of an ever-brightening dawn.

“I’ve been…” I cleared my throat and made a vague gesture. It seemed better than saying, *Laurie and I have been fucking like rabbits.* “I, uh, faced my fears. I overcame my trauma and all that. So I don’t need to go to a therapist anymore.”

Emma hesitated. She picked up a piece of bacon, and she held it between two painted fingers as her faded eyes met mine. “Sweetheart, that’s not how healing works. It takes time to go forward after… what you went through. That pain *will* come back. I’m so happy to hear you’ve benefited from the sessions with Consuelo, which is why you should keep seeing her. You can talk to her about anything, you know. Your conversations don’t have to be about one topic.”

She was so earnest, so sincere in her concern for me that whatever annoyance I might’ve usually felt just wasn’t there. Swallowing a sigh, I went against my instinct to avoid touch and put my hand over hers. Emma’s fears whispered through me and a faint flavor coated my tongue. Thankfully, it was overpowered by the coffee and syrup. “Okay,” I said. “Okay, I’ll keep seeing her.”

Emma rewarded me with a huge smile. I smiled back, thinking about how it always felt slightly easier when I was around her. Before we could say anything else, Damon finally emerged from the bathroom carrying Matthew on his hip. My nephew’s dark hair was combed back and he wore a striped sweater. His big eyes met mine, and in spite of the magic ring I wore, the toddler didn’t seem concerned or alarmed at the sight of a stranger in our loft.

I dropped my fork and thrust my arms out. “Hand Matt over to me, and no one gets hurt.”

Damon rolled his eyes and heaved a resigned sigh. He complied just as Emma shoved the bacon in her mouth and blurted, the words muffled, “Dibs on the shower!”

Hearing this, I wanted to kick myself. There were now seven people living in this loft, and I should’ve thought about the fact there was only one shower besides the one in the master bathroom. I bounced Matthew and raised my voice to call after her. “Emma, you could’ve just used mine!”

Now wearing a coat and hat, Damon came to put the same items on his son. He tucked Matthew’s arms into the coat sleeves and raised his eyebrows at me. “Hey, I’ll take you up on that offer.”

“Of course. Seriously, use it anytime. Where are you—” Something furry and gray dove beneath my stool. As Damon lifted Matthew from my lap, I peered down at the kitten that had finally deigned to make an appearance. She batted at my ankles and I caught hold of her, ignoring the pinprick of her tiny claws. “*There* you are. I really need to figure out a name for you, huh?”

“Actually, we’ve been calling her Hello,” Damon said, looping a scarf around Matthew’s neck.

A soft laugh slipped out of me. I dodged a swipe of the tiny creature’s paw. “Why? Where are you going, by the way?”

“Work. I got a job at the clinic in town. Just a front desk thing, but it has me thinking I might go back to school. Major in nursing.” Damon shrugged.

I gaped at him, then cast an exaggerated glance around me. “How long was I gone?”

“You’re hilarious. Oh, and the name thing. I was trying to teach Matthew how to say ‘hello,’ but he got confused, and he decided that was the word for kitten, I think. Or maybe he just couldn’t get enough of greeting her, I don’t know. By the time he stopped, we’d all started calling the cat Hello. Now he responds to it. So… sorry about that.”

The name struck a chord inside me, and I was so distracted that I didn’t respond. Damon propped Matthew on his hip again, preparing to leave while my mind went back to that conversation with Collith for the second time since waking up. *There are many things I cannot promise, because we live in a world of variables. Anything I can promise, though, I do so gladly. My home, my life, my heart. I will never tell you goodbye, because I will never leave you. I will give you a life of hellos, Fortuna Sworn.*

I blinked the memory back and realized that my brother had opened the door.

“Damon,” I said. He turned back, still holding Matthew in his arms. Standing there, Damon resembled our father so strongly that an ache filled my heart. I strove to hide it as I told him, “I think that’s a great idea. The nursing program, I mean. You’d be really good at it.”

Damon paused, giving me a look I couldn’t decipher. “Thanks, Tuna Fish. I’ll see you tonight, okay?”

“Yeah. See you tonight.” The kitten—*Hello*, I corrected myself silently—mewled and wriggled, frantic to be free again. I bent to return her to the

floor. She darted across the room like the devil was chasing her. I hopped off the stool, too, thinking I'd load the dishwasher before Emma finished with her shower.

That was when I noticed Damon had stopped again. I assumed he'd forgotten something, and I rounded the island without comment. His voice floated to me at the same moment I removed a plastic, child-sized plate from the sink. "I'm really glad you're back," he said.

Startled, I turned to meet my brother's gaze. Part of me was terrified this was another one of Belanor's tricks, or it was a dream I'd wake up from soon. "Me, too," I managed.

Probably sensing my fear, Damon offered a parting smile. I found myself staring for a different reason entirely, now. Because it was the smile he used to give me, back when everything was simpler. Before we'd gone beneath the ground and reemerged from the darkness with terrible scars. The curve of his lips was a soft and crooked thing, full of fondness and shared history. The image etched onto my mind like a tattoo. It made me remember the day I'd gotten in my car and found Damon sitting in the passenger seat. *We made a promise, remember?*

At that moment, I knew that my brother had forgiven me. I didn't regret what I'd done, and maybe Damon didn't regret it anymore, either. Forgiveness had been given, nonetheless. The shadows and ghosts that Jassin had put between us were finally gone, and over time, his terrible legacy would fade into nothing. Just as he deserved.

The door closed behind Damon with a gentle sound, and suddenly I was grateful he and Matthew were gone—if they'd lingered, they would've seen my tears. I roughly wiped them away with the heels of my hands.

I hadn't cried this much since I was a child. It was like I'd been moving through life as a dragon, covered in a hard exterior, breathing fire at every threat. Then Belanor had come along and ripped off every scale, one by one, and doused the flames inside me. Now water and sorrow were all that remained.

With a shuddering breath, I faced the empty loft. I could hear Emma in the bathroom, singing a Pink Floyd song at the top of her lungs. God, she was bad. The beginnings of a smile began at the corners of my mouth… until I looked toward that bedroom again. Another memory of Collith flickered, like an old television coming into focus.

Please forgive me. Please.

The echoes of his voice faded just as a sound came from down the hall. It was a faint smattering, of sorts, like there was a small creature trapped within the walls, scratching to get out. Swiping at my eyes again, I followed it into the laundry room.

I found the source of the noise instantly. Hearing my footsteps, Hello poked her head out from the hole in her pink, plastic box. The floor was covered in gray cat litter. The kitten looked at me with wide eyes, bright with innocence. “Little beast,” I muttered.

There was a broom tucked next to the washer. Eager for distractions, desperate to stay busy, I tended to the litter box. After that, I started a load of laundry. Once the machine’s low hum filled the loft, I finished loading the dishwasher. I pushed the door shut, and a second later I heard Emma turn the shower off. Spinning, I leaned against the edge of the counter to contemplate what I could do next.

The stillness sent me into a strange panic. I knew that if I stayed here, and we spent the day together, Emma wouldn’t ask questions. That wasn’t her way. But I wouldn’t be able to hide the effects of what Belanor had done, either. I wouldn’t be able to avoid thoughts of Collith and how that hole in the wall had come to be. Emma would see my pain. And sometimes, pain was too raw, too fresh to be observed.

So I rushed to the hooks on the wall, snatched the van keys, and fled down the stairs. I didn’t even think to put on a coat.

Outside, the cold sank into my skin with the brutality of a thousand needles. Only my Fallen blood kept me from shivering or faltering. I made a beeline for the van, looking around as I went. There was still no sign of Finn, and Lyari hadn’t made a reappearance, either. I couldn’t wait for them.

The moment I got into the vehicle I’d inherited from the goblins, I cranked up the volume on the stereo. Music battered at my eardrums. Throwing the gear into reverse, I tore down the driveway in a spew of gravel and noise.

Ten minutes later, I was in town. Keeping my promise to Nym, my first stop was at an antique store. I picked out a clock that looked like it was meant for a mantle, its outside made of oak wood. Its ticking was inaudible, a detail I liked, for some reason. I put my purchase in the van and headed for Bea’s.

The warmth enveloped me like an embrace, and as I wiped my feet on the rug, it suddenly felt easier to breathe. To exist without the ever-constant urge to cry. Exhaling, I pocketed the van keys and walked up to the bar, feeling more like myself with every step. Here, I knew the smells and the faces as if they were part of me. Here, most of the memories were safe and mundane. There were also distractions in abundance. I rested my hands on the counter and turned, taking in the familiar setting. Angela walked past the row of booths holding a coffee pot in each hand, looking harassed as ever.

"Seat yourself," she said in passing. There was no glimmer of recognition in her face, and it took me a few seconds to remember that I wore a magical disguise. My co-worker had looked at me and seen the plain-faced stranger I'd met in the mirror last night.

Five minutes, I told myself. I'd take off the ring for five minutes, long enough to find Bea and explain everything. Fear trickled through my veins at the thought of putting her in danger. It had only been a day since I'd torn Belanor's mind to shreds, though—if he did manage to heal and awaken, it would take much longer than that.

No one had noticed me standing there yet. I took a breath and slid the ring up my finger, then pocketed it.

"Fortuna?"

Hearing this, I put my back to the main room, tucking the ring away. A smile had already stretched across my face. "Hey, Gretchen."

The kind-eyed human circled the counter to reach me. Like Emma, Gretchen's small stature didn't affect the strength of her arms. She pulled me close and made a happy sound. "Danny mentioned you were back! I had to stop Bea from driving over there in the middle of the night. We figured you'd need some time to recuperate. It's so good to see you, sweetheart."

Shit, I thought. I should've mentioned to Danny that I'd been hoping to keep my return quiet.

"What is…" I started. Gretchen released me, leaning back to see my face, and I hesitated. "What is everyone saying? About where I've been?"

Bea's partner moved to get back behind the bar, speaking as she went, "All we knew was that there was an attack on the hospital. No one was killed, thankfully, but there were several people injured and it looked as though you'd been taken. Now that you're back, I'm sure the sheriff will

want to ask some questions. Don’t worry, though, all of that can be dealt with later. For now, you look like you could use a hot meal and some coffee.”

“Thanks, Gretchen. I just ate, but coffee sounds great.”

“Coming right up.” She beamed and moved to get a mug.

At that moment, a figure swept out of the hallway that led to the back. I blinked when I realized it was Ariel. Carrying fresh plates of food, she bustled between the rows of tables as if she’d been doing it her entire life. No one in this bar would ever guess that she’d been playing the part of a human for months, rather than years. Her glamour was firmly in place, and it was flawless. To any mortal eye, Ariel looked like an ordinary girl with dark hair, smooth brown skin, and a delicate frame. Only I knew that the confidence of her movements was due to the grace of the fae, and the subtle muscles in her arms were from hours of training with a sword.

Why was she still here? Hadn’t anyone told her about the coup?

I was about to get her attention when Bea appeared at the far end of the bar. She said something to Gretchen, the words hushed so no customers would hear. Her features were pale and haggard. I truly had been intending to tell my boss the truth about me, especially after the cherubim had destroyed this place and forced her to shut down for repairs. Seeing her now, I knew I couldn’t. Not today, at least. Bea already had enough on her mind—she didn’t need the monumental weight of learning that an entire supernatural world existed alongside her own, unseen and deadly.

If you don’t tell her now, when will you? a pitiless inner voice challenged. *Tomorrow? Next week? By then, it may be too late.*

Providing yet another welcome distraction, Ariel set an empty tray on the counter and finally noticed me.

“Fortuna! You’re back!” she exclaimed, rushing to hug me. Her scent assailed my senses. *Wildflowers*, I thought.

As she pulled away, I glanced at Gretchen and lowered my voice. “No offense, but why are you still here? The person who ordered you to watch over me isn’t exactly in charge anymore.”

“I swore a vow of fealty to Collith,” Ariel said matter-of-factly. “He is not dead. Until then, I will carry out his orders.”

The stubborn light in her eyes reminded me of Lyari. I studied her, and for some reason, I chose that moment to remember Belanor’s threat. If he woke up, he’d kill everyone on the path to his prized Nightmare, and not

just the people closest to me. He'd kill Ariel, this small faerie with the bounce in her step and a smile always at the ready. A faerie who, like so many others I'd met recently, possessed loyalty in her heart, along with the usual dark things that lived inside all of us.

I couldn't let that happen. I needed a better plan than depending on a goblin's bespelled ring.

"Is he okay?"

Ariel's question drew me out of my silent, anxious spiral. I followed her gaze and spotted Finn, my eyebrows going up in surprise. *Not on a hunt after all, then.*

The werewolf sat at the table next to the window. Bea's name was stickered across its length, casting the letters onto the sun-brightened surface Finn rested his elbows on. He stared through the glass, out at the street, as if he saw something the rest of us didn't. There was something striking about him, an allure I couldn't put my finger on. Maybe it was his broad shoulders, or the quiet strength that emanated from his eyes. I could understand, suddenly, why he'd caught Ariel's interest. And maybe more, if the way her gaze lingered on him was any indication.

Love was so cruel. There Ariel was, ardently watching Finn, while Cyrus cast longing glances at her every time she passed his line of sight.

As I turned back to her, I realized that Ariel probably hadn't heard about the events from the past few weeks. Especially if she hadn't been back to Court in a while. Did she know her king was free?

Before I could ask her, someone called the faerie's name. "Shoot," she muttered.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Go. We'll talk later."

Ariel shot me a parting smile, waggled her fingers, and hurried away. I watched her go, reaching into my pocket for the ring.

When Bea's eyes flicked toward me, she only saw a stranger holding a cup of coffee.

Ignoring the whisper of regret that went through me, I walked over to Finn. I suppressed a sigh at the sight of Regina Hart, Granby's local gossip. She stood next to the table Finn had claimed, so focused on him that she didn't realize they were no longer alone. She wore a pink jumpsuit and clutched a beer in one hand. It was barely nine o'clock, but details like that had never mattered to Regina. "…must say, you have *such* beautiful eyes," she was saying, batting her eyelashes.

“They’re colored contacts,” I offered, setting my coffee down. Regina was so startled that she visibly jumped.

“Oh.” Her gaze moved between us, evaluating, appraising. “Of course. Should’ve known—no one has gold eyes like that. I’m Regina, by the way. How do you two know each other? Are you here for a visit or just passing through?”

My tone became airy. “I’m here for a visit, yes. Not sure how long, but Finn has made me *so* comfortable that I may never want to leave. Oh, as for how we know each other, I’m just using him for his body. Chains, whips, that sort of thing. You probably won’t see much of me, honestly. We’ll be pretty tied up, if you know what I mean.”

I winked, and I knew if Collith had been there, he would’ve done one of his small sighs. Regina’s mouth was pinched, her brow furrowed. She probably didn’t know whether or not to believe me, especially considering I hadn’t given a name. “Well, welcome to Granby,” she said.

“Thanks!” I gave her an exaggerated, toothy grin. Regina stared at me for another moment, as though she were trying to decide if I was mocking her. Slowly, she turned and walked off. I settled onto the chair across from Finn. “That should keep her busy for a while.”

He didn’t respond. He also didn’t turn his head or greet me. I considered asking him why he’d come here, but a quiet instinct urged me not to. Instead, I took a sip of coffee and reveled in the sweet taste. A moment later, Ariel’s laugh tinkled through the air. I pictured the way she’d looked at Finn, and for the first time, I wondered if there was any possibility of that interest being reciprocated.

“Do you ever think about remarrying?” I asked without preamble, angling my body toward Finn again.

He didn’t take any time to think about his answer. “No.”

I wanted to know why, but I still didn’t want to push him, either. If I knew one thing about this werewolf, it was that he only spoke when he was ready. We were alike in that way. Thinking the conversation was over, I brought the mug to my lips again. My attention darted back to Finn when he continued, “I will never love anyone the way I loved Amelia. It wouldn’t be fair to a new mate.”

Amelia. I’d never heard him say her name before. I waited for Finn to go on, but then someone passed the window next to us, and a change stole over my friend that I’d never seen before. He came *alive*, his spine

straightening from the force of the emotion I saw in his face. Our conversation forgotten, I followed the werewolf's gaze.

The person that had caught his attention was Phil's daughter, Amy. Finn had saved her from the cherubim the night they attacked Bea's. She was obviously late for school—a backpack thumped against her gangly body, and her corkscrew curls billowed around her anxious expression in what looked like a frigid gust of wind. Finn watched the girl hurry by, his eyebrows drawn together. His mouth was tight.

Pain, I thought. Seeing that girl caused him pain. Maybe his daughter would have been the same age, if she were alive, or they bore a resemblance to each other.

All at once, I knew this was the reason Finn was at Bea's. I wondered how many other mornings he'd sat here, waiting and hoping to catch a glimpse of Amy. Every time he wasn't at the house, I'd just assumed he was off hunting or running. *Oh, Finn.* I felt the werewolf's grief as acutely as my own, and it deepened my understanding of him. He came here because, for the handful of seconds Phil's daughter appeared, Finn could pretend that she was *his* daughter. His child. She'd been ripped away from him by violence and fear.

Amy was gone now. I refocused on Finn, at a loss for words. I knew from personal experience that there wasn't anything I could say, in any language, to close the invisible hole in his chest.

Still turned toward the window, Finn gripped the edge of the table. The skin on his arms began to bubble. Alarm blazed through me, and the heat became an inferno when I saw that he'd started shaking, as well. Was he about to shift in the middle of the bar? In front of all these people?

Without thinking, I reached across and put my hands over his. Though the touch seemed to calm Finn, his body going still, my power ran unchecked. Flavors and phobias came at me, along with all the rest. I caught a glimpse of that final, terror-filled memory. A door bursting open. Windows shattering. Gunshots sounding. Then Finn's agonized cry echoed across time, and I felt his terror as if she had died yesterday. *Katie!*

He'd carried her through the woods, her lifeblood staining his hands and his shirt. Beneath a wide moon and a starless sky, Finn spoke to his daughter in low, urgent tones, trying to keep her awake while he tracked Astrid's pack. Every once in a while, he remembered that his mate was dead and he'd been forced to leave her body behind. He couldn't lose

Katie, too. The thought made him look back down at her heart-shaped face and the bleak cycle began again. “Look at me, baby. Stay with me. Don’t fall asleep, sweetheart, don’t fall asleep.”

It had been, and still was, the worst night of his entire life.

“She was beautiful, Finn,” I murmured, blinking the images away. The action caused some tears to fall, too.

Finn’s amber eyes met mine. The lump in his throat worked, and his voice was more gravelly than usual as he replied, “Yes. Yes, she was.”

Slowly, I pulled my hands back and tucked them under the table. Finn did the same. Though we couldn’t be more different physically, it felt like we were mirror images of each other. Identical in our despair. I was tired of it. I was weary of hurting. I was sick of grief. I had tried all the healthy ways of dealing with it—exercise, therapy, family. Suddenly I was in the mood for trying some unhealthy tactics.

With a hollow smile, I cocked my head at Finn. “Hey, would you like to get drunk with me?”

The werewolf searched my expression. I’d hoped he would smile or say something, and when his silence once again filled the space between us, I swallowed a sigh. Deciding to proceed with my plan anyway, I twisted around and waited until Gretchen noticed me. “Ma’am? Could we get a couple bloody marys?” I called.

She gave me a polite nod. “You got it.”

I smiled, but she had already turned away. The absence of her usual warmth made my brows lower. It wasn’t until I started fiddling with the ring that I remembered Gretchen had no idea who I was. It was harder than I’d expected, being unknown to the people I’d worked with for so long. But if it meant keeping them safe, anonymity was a price I would gladly pay.

Gretchen had just started making our drinks when a large group of men entered, leaving a row of snowmobiles parked outside. They approached the bar in a burst of noise, reeking of gasoline and sweat. Gretchen listened to their orders, nodding, already in motion. If I hadn’t been wearing the ring, I would’ve gotten up to help. Grateful my hands were still out of sight, I clenched them into fists and fixed my gaze on the table.

Ariel was the one to bring our bloody marys over. “Enjoy!” she said, flashing a white-toothed grin.

I caught the curious glance she gave me, and I knew the instant Ariel recognized my scent; her eyes brightened with curiosity. But she was a faerie, through and through, and she didn't ask any questions. Since I had taken enough risks for one day, I didn't offer an explanation, either. I grasped one of the drinks and pulled it close, hoping that Gretchen had been generous with her pour.

As the sun marched along its high, blue road, I drank. The bloody marys gradually became hard liquor, and if Gretchen harbored any judgment for the stranger getting tipsy in her bar, she kept it hidden. Finn was less enthusiastic in his pursuit of forgetting—the glass that rested in front of him was still his first. I never saw him put it to his mouth, but the liquid inside gradually lowered.

"You've become one of my best friends, you know," I told the werewolf abruptly. Unable to look at him now, I stared into the depths of my glass. "That's why Belanor chose you for the arena—he was trying to break me. He was right, too. The thought of killing you is what forced my powers out of a dormant state."

More silence from his side of the table. Insecurity took root inside me. What if Amy wasn't the only reason for Finn's distance? Was it anger that stopped him from speaking? I raised my gaze, on the verge of apologizing for the part I'd played in what he'd endured at the Seelie Court. The words vanished from my mind when he growled, "What does *he* want?"

He was looking out the window again, the golden eyes that Regina liked so much shining unnaturally bright. Following them, I discovered that Gil stood on the other side of the street. He'd clearly borrowed some clothes from Adam, because he wore an oil-stained tank top beneath an unfamiliar coat. Though he wasn't looking at us, I knew he was aware of my presence—the bond prickled from our proximity to each other. Gil's movements were overly casual as he threw a cigarette down and ground it into the concrete with his boot.

"He's in control, I swear," I said quickly, seeing how Finn's body had gone tense. He'd started to rise from the seat. I put my hand on his arm, and once again, the touch seemed to soothe him. Slowly, Finn sank down. But he didn't take his eyes off the blond vampire trying so valiantly not to glance in our direction.

Guess it's true what they say about vampires and werewolves, I thought. Natural enemies. Finn's ferocity had still taken me by surprise;

most of the time, I forgot that an actual wolf lurked beneath his skin. No matter how kind or how gentle he was as a person, he would always possess another side, too. A wild creature that used its teeth to tear at flesh and howled at the night sky.

The same could be said for me or Gil. I looked back at the vampire, and compassion stirred in my chest. If I concentrated on the connection between us, I could feel his uncertainty. His loneliness. Gilbert Payne's entire life had changed, and suddenly he was in a strange place, tormented by pangs of an unbearable craving. Echoes of it reached me, like ripples of water traveling to shore. If those were merely reverberations of it, I couldn't imagine the strength within Gil to resist. It was no small miracle that he hadn't already come inside this bar and begun ripping the humans apart, limb from limb, spraying the air with the blood he so fiercely desired.

After a few seconds, I sensed Finn's eyes on me. I suspected that if he were in his wolf form, the hair along his spine would've been standing on end.

I didn't want to talk about Belanor or the horrors I endured at his hands, especially while I was buzzed, but it seemed inevitable. I swallowed and stared down into my near-empty glass, tilting it this way and that. "I didn't tell you everything last night," I said without lifting my gaze. "Before… before Belanor killed him, Gil was a Nightmare. He was like me, Finn. When I said that I brought him back to Granby because I knew Adam could help him, it was the truth. But it wasn't the whole truth. I also think he can teach me things. Help me control my power."

Another pause swelled between us. Eventually Finn said, his voice full of warning, "Newborns are dangerous, Fortuna."

Now I did look up. My fingers curled tightly around the glass. "I'm dangerous, too. That hasn't stopped you from trusting me. You probably shouldn't—well, actually, I know you shouldn't—but it hasn't stopped you."

The words came out sharper than I meant them to. I didn't apologize, though. A muscle worked in Finn's jaw as he stared at Gil some more. "I can smell the magic between you," he muttered. "What else happened in that place?"

I hesitated. The bond was part of the story I'd left out last night, and I wasn't sure why. *Liar*, my inner voice crooned. I cringed. Why did anyone

withhold the truth? Shame and fear, a topic I happened to be an expert on. An image of Collith's tear-filled eyes loomed in my memory, and to push it away, I thought of the awful thing I'd done in that small, white cell.

"The prince murdered Gil right in front of me," I said flatly. "When he woke up again, and revealed he was a V addict, we realized he was in transition. Fighting him physically wasn't an option, of course, so I turned to magic. By some miracle, I remembered a spell that I'd read about in Kindreth's journals. I forced Gil to exchange blood with me and recite words of intention. Just as I'd hoped, it formed a link between us and helped him resist the bloodlust. In a lot of ways, it's similar to what I shared with the Unseelie Court, but it's also deeper than that. For lack of a better way to describe it, he feels like… family. Fitting, really, considering he didn't get a choice in the matter."

This time, I expected Finn's silence. I gave him a wry, bitter smile and tipped my glass back, finishing the last dregs of the whiskey. "Don't worry, you don't need to say anything. I'm judging me, too."

"That's not what I'm doing," he said. I cocked my head in a wordless question, and the vulnerability in Finn's eyes made my brows draw together. He paused one more time, as though he were gathering courage. Then he raised his golden eyes to mine and began, more impassioned than I'd ever seen him, "Does—"

The front door opened at that same moment, and Bella O'Connell came through, followed by four other women I recognized from my years of serving here.

The sight of Ian's wife seemed to cast my mind in shades of gray. Hunching my shoulders, I reached across the table and took a drink from Finn's, then set it down with a hard thud. I felt the weight of his gaze on me, but I pretended not to notice. The honey-sweet tones of Bella's voice drifted toward our booth, and I couldn't stop myself from glancing at her again. The humans settled at one of the round tables placed in the center of the room. Two of them had red-rimmed eyes and another placed a box of tissues next to the salt and pepper shakers.

Ariel turned from the bar holding four waters in her hands, and she noticed my *come here* gesture. She approached our booth, her head tilted in that distinctly fae way. Once she was close enough I asked under my breath, "What's going on over there?"

The faerie's pert nose wrinkled with obvious dislike. "Oh, that's a support group Bella O'Connell started for the widows of Granby. They come here every Thursday, get absolutely wasted, and leave a pile of pocket change as a tip."

"Classy."

"Very. Are you sure you want to come back to work?" Ariel didn't wait for a response; Bella was trying to get her attention, waving her hand so hard that the gold bracelet she wore moved like a flag.

Ariel had barely reached the table when Ian's widow began rattling off her order. Listening to her voice caused a visceral reaction in me, like flipping a light switch. I couldn't sit there anymore. The restless, jittery sensation racing through my veins was all-too familiar—it started happening after my parents' deaths. The feeling came back when Damon disappeared. Then I'd gone to the crossroads and made a deal with a demon, making it unbearable.

The best way I'd learned to cope with it was by running.

"Would you mind driving me home?" I blurted to Finn.

His only response was to push away from our table and stand. Giving the werewolf a grateful smile, I dropped some cash where Ariel would find it and got to my feet, too. Gretchen was still busy behind the bar, and Bea worked beside her now. Silently promising myself that I would speak to them soon, I moved toward the door.

In doing so, I looked past the table of women again. Bella caught my gaze, and something made her frown. I turned away instantly, aware that I'd probably caught her notice even more now. Finn opened the door for me and stood with his back against it, waiting.

I hurried by, eager to be in the cool air and away from the human who reminded me of the lives I'd ruined. I may not have stopped her husband's heart, but Laurie had done it for my sake. Ian's blood was on *my* hands, and if Bella O'Connell ever found out, I wasn't sure what would happen.

But I didn't want to find out.

I'd parked alongside the curb. As I headed for the van, I couldn't help a glance at the place where Gil had been smoking. The sidewalk was empty, a forlorn leaf skittering across it. He must've returned to Adam's shop. Finn opened the passenger door for me, his nostrils flaring. I wondered if he was trying to pinpoint Gil's location by scent. *Stubborn, overprotective wolf.*

Later, I wouldn’t remember getting in, or Finn doing the same. All the liquor I’d consumed felt like a pleasant warmth inside my brain. With a drowsy sigh, I slumped against the seat and closed my eyes.

They shot open again when Finn turned the key in the ignition and the radio blared at a deafening volume. His hand flew to the knob and spun it faster than I could track. Finn didn’t turn it back on, and I didn’t ask him to—the whiskey had quieted those voices I’d been so desperate to drown out earlier. Most of them, at least. The werewolf steered us in the direction of home, and I rested my temple against the window, thinking of the last time he and I had been alone together. Before the Seelie Court, before Belanor, we’d faced each other in a storm. Sometimes that night felt like a thousand years ago, and then the regret would hit me as if it had happened yesterday.

“You haven’t asked me about it,” I said dully.

Finn didn’t ask what I meant; he didn’t need to. It had been hovering around us, haunting us, since the moment I’d sat down at his table. Every time I thought of those moments, I could picture his face perfectly, remember the light of pleading in his beautiful eyes. I could feel the vicious bite of the wind and see the snowflakes swirling all around in a desperate frenzy. *Don’t leave me again*.

“You just got home. You need to rest,” Finn rumbled. The proximity of his voice made the image dissipate.

Relief bloomed in my chest. I worried it would show on my face, so I looked away, gazing out the window as if I hadn’t driven along this road a thousand times. The whiskey continued working its way through me, but it wasn’t enough. I could still feel the icy breath of memory upon my neck. Collith. Belanor. Demons.

“What will you do for the rest of the day?” Finn asked. The fact that he spoke at all was a dead giveaway of his concern for me. He could probably smell my rising tension.

Contemplating his question, I watched a bird soar over the trees. It was hardly more than a dark speck against the gray sky. Just before it faded from sight, Nym’s innocent voice came to me, the edges of it tinged with a broken sort of hope. *What’s the point of having wings if I can’t fly?*

I didn’t want to think about wings. I didn’t want to think about flying. I didn’t want to think about anything.

“Forget,” I answered finally, hearing Nym in my voice, now, instead of my head. Turning away from the sky, I looked at the road ahead with heavy-lidded eyes. “I’m going to forget.”

And that was exactly what I did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

By the time I fell into bed, I'd finished half a bottle of vodka from Collith's liquor cart.

I thought Finn had been drinking, too, but he either held his liquor extremely well or he'd only been sipping from his cup, rather than the generous gulps I'd done, because he entered the room on feet far steadier than my own. Moments after I'd fallen across the mattress, I felt him tug the covers over my lower half.

"You don't need to take care of me," I said. Or tried to, at least—the words slurred together more than I wanted to admit.

Finn's answer was soft as ever, but there was a lining of steel in his voice. "Yes, I do."

I tried to look at him. I couldn't seem to open my eyes, though. After a few attempts, I gave up and mumbled, eyes still closed, "Why?"

But the werewolf didn't respond this time. Or maybe he did, and I fell asleep too soon.

I was so drunk that I couldn't find the dreamscape. That didn't stop the nightmares from finding me, though. They shrieked and cackled their way through my head like hyenas. Every bad thing that had happened to me. To my family. Then I heard the melancholy chime of an old clock, marking the Witching Hour. I saw an empty crossroads, the ground lit by a single streetlight. Ian O'Connell stood there, smiling. The badge on his chest gleamed.

When I tried to run, I sat upright with a frantic gasp.

It took several seconds to realize I was at the loft. Ian was gone, and the crossroads had been replaced by four walls and a wooden floor.

I didn’t know that I was awake, at first. I searched the room wildly, expecting to see one of the shadowy figures that had chased me all night. Fende and his branding iron, a minotaur and its ax, Gwyn and her sword. Nothing moved. Panting, I started to swing my legs to the floor. In doing so, my gaze fell onto the cover of *Moby Dick*—I was *never* going to finish that wretched book—and the sight of the title calmed me. My heartbeat slowed.

Dreams, I thought. *They were all just dreams.*

Oliver had been guarding me for so long that I’d forgotten how it felt, recovering from a nightmare. As I got comfortable again, I finally noticed glowing eyes in the dim corner. *Finn*. Some tension left me at the realization. I knew I should probably lecture him for spending the night in a chair, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Not when I was so grateful to see him there, solid and reassuring.

“You only pretended to drink that beer, didn’t you?” I said, sinking onto the pillow. For the second time that night, I didn’t hear Finn’s answer, if it ever came.

The next time I awoke, he was gone and Lyari sat in the corner instead. Sunlight poured through the window and shone on the faerie like a spotlight.

Once again, I was jarred at the sight of her without armor. That was how I knew I wasn’t dreaming anymore; I would never conjure Lyari Paynore and make her look so… ordinary. My Right Hand wore a pink cotton shirt with quarter sleeves, and dark blue jeans covered in knee-high boots. Her hair was scraped back into a low ponytail. Had she gone back to Court for her clothes? Where was she keeping her belongings now that she’d been banished? God, I’d upended Lyari’s entire life, and I hadn’t even given a thought to setting up a room for her.

I opened my mouth to ask her where she’d slept, but she spoke first. “What do you dream about?”

It wasn’t like her to ask questions, especially personal ones. Something about Lyari’s expression made my own questions fade. I studied her, then rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. “Last night? Just your run of the mill nightmares,” I answered blearily. “Every other night? That’s a very complicated answer, and I’m too hungover for it today.”

“There’s water on the nightstand.”

Startled, I turned my head to look. She was right—a tall glass rested next to the alarm clock, bubbles clinging to the inside of it. The tiny pockets of air glowed in a slant of sunlight. I reached over, picked it up, and downed the entire thing. My gulps were loud in the stillness.

As I drank, Lyari started talking again. “Before I left Court, my mother berated me for lending you her journals. She was quite… agitated about it. I got the impression there’s something she doesn’t want anyone to see.”

Even though Lyari didn’t ask the question outright, I heard it tucked within her words. *Did you find something?* There was no point in hiding this truth, either—she would hear my heartbeat or detect some other tic. I nodded, wiping my damp chin with the back of my wrist. “I did read a passage that echoed the same sentiments. On the page, Kindreth mentions that she should burn the journal after she’d written the spell down.”

“The spell?” Lyari repeated. There was a frown in her voice.

Shit. I hadn’t actually decided whether to tell anyone else about what I’d done to Gil. But Lyari was bound to find out sooner or later, especially since Laurie knew. He’d probably mention it at the worst possible moment, just to make a situation more entertaining for himself. Raising my gaze to Lyari’s, I nodded hesitantly. I was still clutching the empty glass. “It’s very similar to the vows of fealty you pay the Unseelie rulers. A way to bind another creature to you. Except this spell is a little more… intense.”

“Have you done it? Bound someone to you?” she asked. When I nodded again, she almost seemed impressed. “Who?”

“Gil. I did it just after he was turned. To save my own life. Incredibly selfish, I know.”

Lyari’s brow wrinkled. “Selfish?”

“For taking his choice from him,” I clarified, finally leaning over to put the glass back on the nightstand. “For forcing my will upon his.”

The faerie’s expression cleared, and she shook her head. “It’s not selfish to survive, Your Majesty.”

It was ironic that Lyari didn’t like Laurie; they were of similar minds when it came to life and death. I tried to think of his exact words. *When you are in a room with a murderer, there are only two kinds of people. One is the killer. The other is the murdered. Which one would you rather be, at any given time?*

Before I could respond to Lyari, Emma shouted a goodbye from across the loft. The front door slammed. Thinking she'd gone, I opened my mouth, but then Emma appeared in the doorway. She wore an overstuffed coat, a thick scarf, and a fluffy winter hat, all of which made it difficult to see her face. "Goodness, I almost forgot!" the old woman blurted. "This must've been slipped beneath the door while everyone was sleeping. Strangest thing, it was all the way by the island. I tucked it away before Matthew or Hello could do any damage."

She waddled closer to toss an envelope onto my lap. The moment I laid eyes on it, I went still, and it felt like the air thickened with dread. The wax seal was out of place in this modern setting. It was the sort of thing only a faerie would use.

Moving slowly, I lifted the flap and pulled two tickets out, along with a folded piece of paper. I glanced at the tickets first, frowning when I saw there was no information on them. They were unlike anything I'd ever seen before. Instead of paper, they were made of a bronze-colored foil, with an intricate design rising from it. I unfolded the letter next.

National Theatre Munich. December 15th at 7:30 p.m. GMT.

There was no signature or further information. Following a random, flitting instinct, I lifted the paper to my nose and sniffed.

Belanor's cologne clung to it.

My spine stiffened. Emma said something, the words full of worry, but I couldn't think straight enough to reassure her. Her voice barely penetrated the tornado of thoughts surrounding me. Had Belanor awoken, then? Did he know I was here? There had been a prickle of magic when I picked up the envelope. A witch's spell, probably. Belanor probably didn't know where I was, not for certain, but that wouldn't stop a spell from delivering his invitation. That was why Emma had found it on the floor.

Or maybe someone had hand-delivered it. *No,* I thought. Finn would've sensed an intruder.

"Fortuna?"

I lifted my head. Emma and Lyari watched me, and though their expressions couldn't be more opposite, I sensed their mutual concern. I wasn't sure which of them had said my name—I'd have to remind everyone to stop using it, especially now—but Lyari was standing. Her hand was on her hip, as if she'd reached for her sword. "Sorry," I managed,

holding the envelope up. “I think I just got confirmation that Belanor is awake.”

Lyari strode forward and plucked it out of my fingers. She scanned the information in an instant.

“The invitation means that he won’t attack until then,” she said, giving it back. “And the magic means it’s unlikely that he knows where you are. You haven’t taken that ring off, have you?”

I had for a few minutes at Bea’s, but that hardly counted, right? I shook my head uncertainly. Behind Lyari, Emma glanced at the clock. She nibbled her bottom lip. “I was supposed to start my volunteer shift twenty minutes ago. I’ve got the holy weapons you gave me, and we can send a text to the boys so everyone knows. Will you be all right here, Fortuna? Oh, I know, you could come with me!”

I waved my hand at her and finally left the bed. I hoped neither of them could sense the fear poisoning my insides. “Lyari is right,” I said. “The fae may be evil bastards, but they have their own set of rules and laws. And Ems, remember, we should all avoid saying my name.”

“Right.” She nodded. “Okay, I’ll be back later. Hourly updates, I won’t forget.”

She blew me a kiss and darted out the door. A moment later, Lyari’s form began to lighten. I raised my voice in protest. “Where are you going? We should really talk about—”

“The werewolf is nearby,” she interjected, fading even more. We both heard the outer door slam as Emma left. “I’m staying with a friend in Dublin, and I have some things to do there. I’ll come back if any problems arise. You know how to reach me.”

“Wait, you have other friends?” I demanded, but Lyari finished sifting halfway through. I swore and added, “Don’t forget your hourly check-ins!”

There was no way of knowing if she’d heard; by all appearances, I was talking to empty air. For a moment, I just stood there, frowning. It was no great mystery why Lyari was acting so distant and distracted. To a faerie, there was no worse fate than becoming a goblin. They were lesser creatures. Less intelligent, less beauty, less wealth. But Lyari had months, if not years before that happened. Once things calmed down around here, I would search for a way to stop her deterioration. Maybe there were more spells in Kindreth’s journals.

The silence started ringing, and the sound drew me out of my thoughts. I was still standing there, staring at nothing, and it was then I realized I was wearing yesterday's clothes. My mouth tasted terrible, too.

I was about to go into the bathroom when someone knocked on the door.

Had Emma locked herself out? Just in case it wasn't her, though, I rummaged in the nightstand drawer and pulled out Dad's pocketknife. I hadn't soaked it in holy water recently, but the blade could still be useful. I tucked it in my sock and crossed the loft, making a sound of reassurance at Hello when she sprinted past.

When I opened the door, I made sure to put my body behind it. I hadn't lowered my guard, and I would never forget my enemies. Light fell across the figure's face, revealing who it was in an instant.

Quick as a snake, I pulled my knife from its hiding place, flicked it open, and pressed the edge to Collith's throat. He stumbled back and I matched him step for step. We went down the first flight of stairs and slammed into the wall. Collith met my gaze calmly, and even though I was wearing the goblin ring, he didn't seem the least bit fazed.

"What did I say?" I hissed in his face. "I warned you that if we saw each other again, all bets are off."

The threat had barely left my mouth when Laurie materialized beside us. The stairwell wasn't big enough for three, and his chest pressed against both of our shoulders. His cologne teased all my senses.

"You're a target, Fortuna," Laurie said, focusing on me. His hair was slightly damp, and a strand of it hung over his temple. "Not only does every Fallen creature alive now know about the existence of a Nightmare, but the Seelie King wants you, as well. You're not part of either Court and you're an unclaimed female. As far as our world is concerned, you're fair game."

"She is claimed," Collith snarled at him.

"Did you say 'Seelie King'?" I put in.

Laurie hesitated. Golden sunlight streamed down the stairs, highlighting one half of his face. "Yes, Belanor was formally crowned last night… but that's beside the point. No one has forgotten Fortuna's performance during Viessa's coup," he added. "It's also widely known that you're not the sort to take someone against their will. So your claim probably won't be accepted. Unless…"

None of us had moved. My left hand was still flattened on Collith's collarbone, while my right held the knife against his throat. I waited for Laurie to continue, but the seconds ticked past and he just looked at us. "Unless what?" I demanded, exasperated.

Laurie made a sound of matching impatience. "Unless it seems that you've reconciled, of course. Also, I have to ask, do you not own a toothbrush?"

The remark rolled off me. I frowned, thinking I must've misunderstood the meaning behind that word, *reconciled*. But the expression on Laurie's face told me otherwise. My head shook once, an automatic denial. "You mean…"

"I mean, make them believe you've taken him back. He may not be king anymore, but he's still one of the most powerful faeries alive. As it so happens, I just received word of an event that would be perfect for a dramatic statement like this."

I stared at Laurie again, my eyes wide with disbelief. *The opera*. He was talking about the opera. Belanor must've gotten an invitation to them, too.

My lip curled. I stepped back and finally lowered the pocketknife. To put some space between all of us, I retreated up the stairs. I regained control of my rage to regard Laurie and Collith with the cold calculation they themselves had taught me. "You planned this, the both of you," I marveled. "Well, isn't this a Christmas miracle. Sworn enemies, coming together in peace, just to make a fool of the silly Nightmare again. I'm right, aren't I? Get out. *Now*."

Neither of them moved. Laurie heaved a sigh. "Fortuna…"

He shifted closer and started to reach up, presumably to grasp my arms. I pinned him in place with a single look. "If you're thinking about touching me, you should really only do it with body parts you're comfortable losing."

"You know, why don't I just come back later?" Laurie glanced at Collith, who kept his eyes on me, stone-faced. "Do try not to kill each other while I'm gone. We still need to have that orgy. Oh, and darling? *Hate* the new face. Depending on an enchanted ring is a horrible plan, which is why you should seriously consider attending the opera."

He blinked out of sight before I could respond. *Coward*, I thought, whirling to go back inside. I climbed the rest of the stairs, not bothering to

kick the door shut like part of me wanted to. Doors wouldn't stop a faerie like Collith Sylvyre, anyway. Frustrated by the thought, by the entire *situation*, I walked toward the liquor cart.

A new thought occurred to me at the same moment I reached it. Where was Finn? I was surprised he hadn't come running when Collith's spine hit the wall. Worried about my werewolf now, I started making another drink, then reconsidered. Even if Belanor wouldn't attack until the opera, knowing he was awake was reason enough to stay sober. I spun around again, a headache starting at my temples. I glanced toward the kitchen and saw a small light at the base of the coffee maker was on, indicating heat.

God bless you, Emma Miller.

Taking long, subtly frantic strides, I fetched a mug from the cupboard. I pulled the coffee pot out and poured. Steam and trickling sounds rose into the air. Without looking up I asked, "Why are you here, Collith?"

He'd stayed in the doorway this entire time. Watching me silently.

"I came to make sure you're all right." His voice was soft, and the words were spoken like a statement. Fact. No adornments or attempts at persuasion.

I was so desperate to keep the headache at bay that I didn't bother with milk or sugar. Leaning against the edge of the counter, I took my first sip, and it was as bitter as it smelled.

"I'm alive, if that's what you mean," I managed, swallowing. I tried not to wince. "You're looking pretty alive yourself, by the way. Zara must've stopped by the safe house, huh? You don't trust anyone else, and she tends to help people she shouldn't. Believe me, I would know."

Collith's eyes were shadowed, his jaw tight. He didn't acknowledge my comment. "I fucked up," he said bluntly. "I know that. But could you try seeing things from my point of view?"

"Pretty sure I can't fit my head that far up my ass." In another burst of temper, I moved to close the door on him. My coffee sloshed onto the floor.

Collith shoved it back open and demanded, "Are we even now?"

I scoffed, returning to the island to slam my coffee mug down. I couldn't drink it, anyway. "What do you mean?"

"I took something from you, and now you've taken something from me. Or, rather, given it to someone else."

I froze at Collith's words, grateful that he couldn't see my face. Then I considered his words and it clicked—his throne. He was talking about his throne. I almost exhaled in relief. For a wild moment, I'd thought Collith was referring to Laurie in some confusing way. Revealing that he knew what happened between us. *Why does it matter if he knows?* that tiny voice taunted.

Collith was still waiting for an answer to his question.

"No," I said finally, speaking over my shoulder. "We're not even. Not even close."

"What will it take?"

"Nothing. Do you understand? We're *finished*." I spat out the word as if it was broken glass. I went to the cupboard and snatched a glass from the bottom shelf, needing to occupy my hands. Needing to do *something* so Collith wouldn't see how much he still affected me.

Even now, he didn't move from the doorway. Feeling his eyes on the back of my head, I walked over to the refrigerator and shoved my glass beneath the water dispenser. Collith's voice followed me. "We're never finished, because I belong to you, Fortuna Sworn. Regardless of whether or not you belong to me. That very first day in the market, I knew."

I rolled my eyes, facing him again. "I've heard this all before. You knew what we could do together and how powerful we could be, yada, yada. Tell me, what are you doing these days? I imagine you have a lot of free time, being unemployed and all."

This time, Collith didn't have a retort ready. He stood there, hands shoved in his pockets, his chin nearly touching his chest. His lips were pursed and his brow furrowed, the picture of deep thought. Something stopped me from trying to drive him away again. I stayed where I was, waiting for Collith to end the silence.

"When I learned that you'd executed an entire field of people," he said slowly, raising his head, "I had to see it for myself. The image still haunts me. I remember standing there, looking out at the carnage and wondering who I blamed more—you or myself. I spent the entire day tending to the bodies. I bribed people into silence, I called in every favor still owed to me, I dug some of the graves with my own hands. And we took pictures of every single face, so their families could be notified.

"Some of them were my friends, you know. There was Lorenzo, a warlock who rented a stall at the black market to sell his herbs. And Mia

attended that day, a vampire who posed as a buyer to bid on slaves and free them after the auction. Then I found Thomas. Tommy, he liked to be called. He was no saint, but he never harmed anyone for the things he kept in his jars—he was just a scavenger with a strong stomach."

My own stomach was rolling now. Crashing like ocean waves in a storm. I fought the urge to vomit. *Why are you telling me this?* I wanted to ask Collith. I already knew the answer, though. They deserved to be remembered, the people I'd killed. I deserved to know and bear the truth of what I'd done.

But Collith was a fool if he thought the reminder of my own mistakes would make me absolve his.

When it became clear that he was finished, I set the glass of water down on the island, right beside my abandoned coffee. I closed the distance between us once more, stopping only when I stood so close, I could see the flecks of amber in Collith's hazel eyes. Eyes that I hadn't been able to forget, no matter how much pain they brought me. Collith gazed back, the sadness still clinging to his features.

"Get out," I said softly.

He didn't look surprised or disappointed, but he didn't leave, either. Collith just kept looking at me with more shadows in his gaze as he murmured, "You still smell like him, you know."

I went still again. *He knows.*

A secret part of me quaked. Rather than giving in to the strange fear, I lifted my chin. *You have nothing to be sorry for*. "That's none of your business," I told Collith. My voice was firm.

"I apologize. You're absolutely right—that was out of line. I may be a bit more jealous than I thought. I'll go." The faerie began to turn, but then he paused. He looked back at me, frowning. "May I ask you one more thing, before I take my leave?"

"No." I ground my teeth together. "What?"

Collith hesitated. His confusion seemed genuine as he went on, a line between his brows, "Why did you tell Laurie? About what happened at the crossroads? Why were you able to tell him and not me?"

"How do you know about that?" I asked, then shook my head in the space of a heartbeat. "Laurie told you, of course. I shouldn't be surprised—he can never keep his goddamn mouth shut. Fine, if you won't leave, then I will. Close the door behind you when you're done."

I took the van keys off the hook. My coat was next. Trying to outrun Collith's question, I brushed past him and went down the stairwell. He raised his voice and called after me. "Whatever I have to do to earn your forgiveness, I'll do it. I promised that I wouldn't give up on you, remember?"

I stopped at the landing and looked back at him. I pulled on my coat and said, "You promised me a lot of things."

Then I was gone.

The instant I stepped outside, someone took the keys out of my hand. Finn's gentle tenor floated into the still morning. "I'll drive you."

Probably for the best, I thought. Out loud I said, "Thanks."

We headed for the vehicles together. It was bitterly cold, our every breath billowing through the air with crisp detail. Once we'd both gotten into the van, I studied Finn with weary curiosity. From what I could tell, he hadn't changed into his wolf form during the night.

Because of you, my intuition whispered. I'd been such a mess that Finn had probably stayed in this shape as a precaution.

"Where would you like to go?" he asked, putting the key in the ignition. The engine turned over with a violent sputter, and Finn guided us down the frozen driveway.

"I don't know," I said. All I knew was that I had to move, get away, get out. I rolled the window down and the frigid, sharp-edged wind rushed over me, cooling my hot skin.

Finn took me to Adam's.

We didn't say much on the way there. While he maneuvered the van next to the curb, revealing where he'd decided to go, I caught a glimpse of Finn's eyes. They were always gold, a result of being forced to remain in his wolf form at the Unseelie Court… but now they were glowing. It was like seeing Gil with his fangs extended. We were all of us wild things, I thought, and it was a mistake to pretend otherwise.

"Go," I told Finn. "Run. Hunt. I'll be okay."

He looked toward the horizon, as if the wolf were hearing a call. After a second or two, he reached over and squeezed one of my hands in both of his, then let go. Finn left the van in a burst of winter, closing the door behind him, and headed straight for those distant trees. I grabbed my gym bag from the backseat and pocketed the keys. Cold sank into my bones the

moment I got out. At the door of Adam's shop, I turned around for one more sighting of Finn, but he was long gone.

Thirsty again, I decided to enter through the office, where I knew there was a water cooler. I quickly discovered it was empty, and I'd just put the tiny paper cup back when Adam's broad frame filled the doorway. His dark eyes appraised me, and I saw his nostrils give a subtle flare. His silence couldn't be because of the strange face I wore—I'd explained about the goblin ring the night I brought Gil here. Heat burned in my cheeks as I realized that I probably smelled like a bar.

"I'm… dealing with some things," I said lamely.

Without a word, the vampire strode across the room, took a plastic bottle out of a mini fridge, and moved to stand in front of me. He held the water out. I accepted it, noting the oil stains marring the paper label. During the past few weeks, I'd gotten stains just like it on my skin and clothes—it was a hazard of spending time with a mechanic. Smiling faintly, I twisted the cap off and tipped my head back, pressing the edge of the bottle to my lips.

"Can't train right now," Adam said, his gaze averted. Belatedly, I realized that I'd been gulping the water, making my throat move. To a vampire, this was like waving a blood bag before them.

"It's okay," I responded. "I don't think I can train right now, either."

Adam inclined his shaved head. "Kitchen is back there if you want to make yourself some breakfast. Shower is available, too."

"Ouch. Noted."

I'd been hoping to make him smile, but no such luck. Adam nodded at me before striding out of the office. I followed him, wondering if he'd put Gil to work on the cars. There was no sign of my new friend. Deciding to take Adam up on his offer, I started toward the bathroom, walking past his business partner. She was a middle-aged human named Winona, and like the vampire she worked with, she kept to herself. All I could see were her boots, peeking out from beneath a truck. Knowing her dislike for small talk, I didn't try to extend a greeting as I stepped into the bathroom and closed the door.

I'd never used Adam's shower before, and I was relieved to find it was impressively clean for a bachelor. He didn't seem to own any body wash, but there was a bar of soap and some shampoo. I also found a tube of toothpaste, and I brushed my teeth with my finger, scrubbing vigorously.

Once I was clean again, dressed in the clean set of workout clothes from my bag, I crossed the shop again and hurried into the kitchen.

The plan was to make scrambled eggs for everyone, but my gaze immediately went to two bottles on the countertop. One was tequila, and the other cheap whiskey. I walked over to them, and the only sounds in the room drifted from the garage behind me—rock music and power tools.

Despite my decision back at the loft, I found myself reaching for the whiskey. *A little hair of the dog, maybe?* I mused. It would help the hangover, and it would also do something about the feelings that had gathered in my chest since Collith's visit. I tilted the bottle back and forth, watching the fluorescent light glint off the glass.

I felt Gil an instant before he arrived. The newborn strolled into the kitchen and took the scene in with a single glance. We both pretended that his attention didn't flick, however briefly, toward the pulse in my throat. "What are we drinking, then?" he asked finally, stopping.

"Anything but me." I slid one of the bottles down the counter, and he caught it in a blur of movement. "Tequila is always fun."

"Tequila it is. I think I saw an expired box of orange juice in the fridge. We can make ourselves some screwdrivers."

I grinned at him. "Perfect."

The morning passed faster than I thought it would. Gilbert Payne was extremely tolerable company, especially now that he'd been feeding regularly. He looked better, too—there was color in his cheeks, and his features weren't as sharp as they'd been in the throes of his hunger.

At the bottom of every drink, I considered going across the street and having those conversations with Bea and Cyrus I'd been putting off. But then I would pour again, filling our glasses to the brim. *One more*, I started telling myself. *Just one more.*

A slant of light crept slowly over the room, moving like the hand of a clock. Gil and I talked about small things, light things. Traveling, tattooing, my family. Every once in a while, a bolt of guilt struck me, shame over the fact that I was getting shitfaced here when I'd just been reunited with my family. Belanor was out there, too, and even if we were in another ceasefire, I needed to stay vigilant. Then I'd take a gulp from my glass, and the sharp pain faded.

The absence of that pain made it easier to examine all the truths I'd been avoiding.

“I didn’t even bother to find out who he was, you know,” I said suddenly, making another screwdriver. It would be the last one, since we were almost out of orange juice. Ice clattered as I dropped the frozen cubes into my glass.

Gil burped. He was still on his feet, and I’d settled onto the barstool across from him. “Who?”

“A man I killed during the third trial to become the Unseelie Queen. They tied him to a chair, and I stabbed him with my father’s knife. He couldn’t even defend himself.” The memory screamed through me. I saw the dead man’s face twisted in a grimace of pain. With a grimace of my own, I pressed my cold glass against my forehead. I didn’t meet Gil’s eyes as I continued, “I made sure that Shameek was buried, and his family knew how to find him, but I never gave the other man a second thought.”

“Why think about him now?” Gil asked.

There was no judgment in his tone, but I still couldn’t bring myself to look up. Now my mind’s eye filled with Gwyn’s face, and I heard the grim satisfaction in her voice. *Someday you will be just like me*.

“Because it’s relevant,” I said dully. “Back then, when I killed that man, I told myself I was just fucked up. That my dark impulses could be blamed on trauma from my childhood, and all that. But now I know it’s more. The choices I’m making have nothing to do with the horrible things I’ve seen, and everything to do with who I am. Or who I’m becoming, maybe. All I really know is that it feels… bigger than me, sometimes.”

“What? The pain?”

I fell silent, embarrassed that I’d said so much. The vampire waited patiently for an answer, and my voice dropped to a whisper. “The power.”

Gil let out a long breath. I heard him take a drink before he said, “*Fuck*. That’s terrifying, Sworn.”

“You’re telling me.” I raised my head and gave him a hollow smile. “Did you have a happy childhood? For the most part, I mean?”

The vampire leaned his elbows on the counter and tilted his head. His bleached hair caught the light. I watched emotions move over his face, one after the other, and I worried that I’d overstepped in asking such a personal question.

“No,” Gil answered finally. “No, I didn’t stand a chance, really. Before I was born, my mum was captured and taken to a black market auction. For most of those beasties, it was the first time they’d ever seen a

Nightmare, so she wound up getting purchased by one of the richest bastards in the world. He brought her home and treated her like a trophy or a painting. Took her out only when he wanted to play or show off. She got pregnant, and the old man let her carry me to term—never found out why. He probably figured he could make a profit off me. Dear ol' Dad died in that car accident before I reached puberty, though, so he didn't get the chance. They were on their way to a fundraiser, how sick is that? Mum never got free of him."

We looked at each other, and it felt like we'd pulled up our shirts to reveal the jagged scars on our souls. With another smile, I held up my glass. "Look at us. A couple of sad orphans."

"To the orphans." Gil tossed the remainder of his drink back. He clicked his tongue and exhaled. "Right. Now that we've done some proper bonding, will you do me a favor?"

A warm sensation had stolen over me—the buzz we'd been seeking inside all those drinks. At Gil's question, I shook my head and wagged my finger. "Sorry. No can do. Being around so many fucking faeries has made me one cautious sonofabitch. But if you tell me what it is first, I might think about it."

"Fine, fine." Gil picked up the tequila bottle, pressed it to his mouth, and tipped it. I watched his throat move for several seconds. He set the bottle back down and wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve, then said, "I want you to tell Nicky that I'm dead."

I frowned, my grip tightening on the empty glass I still held. "What? Why?"

"Why do you think? I don't want him to see me like this. Nicky would blame himself, somehow. He always did, especially with the V. If he thinks I'm gone, he'll grieve for a while, sure… but then he'll move on. He wouldn't spend his time worrying about me anymore." There was a note of finality in how Gil spoke. I recognized it, and I knew that he'd made his decision. He would follow through on this whether I helped him or not.

But that still wasn't enough to make me agree. "Thinking his best friend is dead would be far worse for Nicky than spending some time worrying about him. Trust me. He'll be *glad* to see you, fangs and all."

"Please," Gil added, acting as if I hadn't spoken. I stayed silent this time, uncertain what to say. Gil must've found his answer in my expression, anyway, because he nodded. He tapped his knuckle against the

counter in an absent movement. I waited for him to bargain or manipulate, like so many others in my life would. I blinked when Gil said instead, “About the power you mentioned.”

“What about it?”

“The way you described it made me think of a wave.” He made a dramatic gesture to demonstrate. *Talks with his hands when he’s buzzed,* I thought to myself, vaguely amused. Oblivious, Gil continued, “A huge wave, vastly bigger than you, like you said. And I thought, well, she needs an anchor, then.”

“An anchor?” I repeated.

“It’s something my mum used to say. Usually when I was having one of my ‘episodes,’, as the servants called them, but the truth is that I used to have delightful tantrums. Mum was the only one who could calm me. She’d touch my chest, and tell me to find my anchor. The thing that made me remember who I was, a reminder there’s good in the world. Might sound silly, but it helped. Maybe it’ll help you, too.” He shrugged.

“Thanks, Gil.” My voice was soft. I studied his face, thinking about how much he’d lost. Pain rarely came to people who deserved it, and Gilbert Payne’s only sin had been the misfortune of being born a Nightmare. I wanted to say something that would erase some of the lines around his mouth. Swallowing a sigh, I added one more splash of tequila into our glasses and said, “I’ll lie to your friend Nicky. If you’re really sure, I’ll tell him you’re gone.”

“Yeah? Well, cheers to that.” Gil clinked his cup against mine again, and relief shone in his eyes. When I saw that, I felt slightly better about the terrible lie I’d just agreed to. We both tipped our heads back to drink. My thoughts went hazy.

By the time Adam closed the shop, and he came looking for us, Gil and I were on the kitchen floor.

“It’s your turn, Adam Horstman,” I announced, noticing him in the doorway. Was I slurring?

The vampire moved deeper into the room, wiping his hands with a rag that hung from his belt loop. “My turn for what?”

I got to my feet and moved toward the bottle. “To have a drink and tell us your story.”

Adam watched me pour tequila into a new glass. I met his gaze, my eyebrows raised in silent expectation. “Three shots. Three questions.

That’s all you get,” he said.

Gil remained where he was, but I could feel his intrigue. I was intrigued, as well. Adam wasn’t one to volunteer information about himself, ever. Once the shot was full, I slid it across the counter. I didn’t need to think about the first question I wanted to ask—it was something I’d been wanting to know since our first date. “What year were you born?”

If Adam was surprised that I hadn’t asked about Dracula, his expression revealed nothing. He tipped the small glass without hesitation and poured its contents down his throat. “1895,” he said.

The directness of Adam’s answer was startling; I’d gotten used to faeries and their non-answers. I tried to hide my eagerness as I poured the next shot. Once again, I slid it across the counter, and he caught it effortlessly. This time, I did consider questioning him about Dracula. But I couldn’t resist solving a little more of the mystery that was my friend Adam.

“*Where* were you born?” I asked.

A blurred movement, and that shot glass was empty, too. “Birmingham.”

I couldn’t hide my surprise—there was no trace of an accent in Adam’s voice. Even when he’d spoken to me in the haze of bloodlust, he hadn’t let one slip. I poured the third drink and wondered what else the vampire had successfully hidden from me. Out in the shop, Winona started the truck she’d been working on. The engine’s growl echoed through the air.

“Okay. Last question.” I paused again, gathering my nerve. I gave the drink a light shove, and we all listened to it skate over the countertop. I waited until he caught it. Then I asked, watching him carefully, “Why did you choose the name Adam Horstman?”

It was a theory I’d had for years, based on small moments and fleeting suspicions. This time, the vampire didn’t answer straight away. He peered into the glass, and his jaw worked.

Eventually he said, his voice flat, “It was the name of the first man I killed. I was sixteen years old.”

He downed the final shot and walked out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I woke in the tent, the wind pushing against its sides.

Oliver wasn't anywhere in sight, so I pulled on my coat and boots, then unzipped the door and stepped into the open. He stood at the edge of the ferry, looking out at the horizon. Everything was gray, making it impossible to discern whether I'd arrived in the morning, or the dreamscape's version of daylight was coming to an end.

As the hours wore on, it seemed to be the former. Oliver and I packed our belongings more from habit than necessity. It didn't take long, and then we drifted back to the edge of the ferry, watching for any more creatures or memories. We didn't say much—Oliver wasn't in a chatty mood, and I couldn't stop thinking about the conversation I'd had with Collith. In an effort to silence our voices, I stared hard at the passing landscape.

It happened gradually, the shifts in our surroundings so subtle that I didn't notice until, suddenly, I realized we'd left the land of ice and cold behind us. Snow had become grass and dirt. Even the sky looked bluer. We were nearly upon the pass now.

As the river carried me and Oliver toward that towering gap, the strange pensiveness that had been hanging over our heads evaporated. I told him about my first couple days back home. The mountains rose up on either side, tall as skyscrapers. It felt like my voice was the only sound in the vast space, save for the birds and the rushing currents.

When I was finished, Oliver responded exactly how I'd known he would. "How can I help?" he asked simply. The wind ruffled his hair.

My chest felt tight. Too many emotions filled the small space, like an overpacked suitcase. “By doing exactly what you’re doing,” I answered. “I want to find out more about my past, my kind. Even if I’m distracted by Belanor while I’m awake, at least I’ll still be searching for answers here. It makes me feel like I have some kind of control, despite the constant chaos that is my life.”

Oliver’s attention shifted to something beyond my shoulder. His mouth set into a grim line. “Speaking of chaos…”

I was already turning, following the direction of his gaze. “Okay,” I said with forced calm. “Time to get off the ferry.”

There was a sheer drop up ahead. Beyond it, the river went on, but there was no way we’d survive that fall.

In unspoken agreement, Oliver and I raced to the other side of the ferry together. The current was already moving faster. Gripping my backpack, I glanced quickly toward the water, then the shore we needed to reach. Anxiety exploded in my stomach. What if there was something in the water, following us, waiting for its chance?

“If we’re doing this, we have to do it now,” Oliver urged.

I nodded—yes, he was right—and we jumped. For an instant in mid-air, it felt like we were children again. *One… two… three!*

Then the river claimed us.

Fortunately, nothing bothered us in the water. After a brief, not entirely unpleasant swim, I sloshed up the riverbank and twisted the hem of my shirt. Water dripped onto the sand. We’d have to dry our clothes *again*, I thought.

Hearing my huff of annoyance, Oliver grinned at me, and I grinned back. The exchange felt so natural and familiar. Like coming home after a long road trip.

“I’m so happy that we’re friends again, Ollie,” I said, my voice softening. The words just came out of me.

He paused. I stopped, too, and scanned the area around us. Had he seen another creature? A memory? My pulse beat a wild tempo inside my throat. Oliver started to face me, but then he stopped again. From this vantage point, I could only see his profile.

Silence wrapped around us. The quiet, combined with the tight set to Oliver’s mouth, made me realize this was about my comment, and not because he had spotted something.

My cheeks felt hot. I wasn't sure what kind of reaction I'd expected from him—warm agreement, maybe, or even a laugh. It had been so long since I'd heard Ollie's laugh. Now I watched him rub his lower lip with the ball of his thumb, his brow furrowed. There was something absently graceful about how he moved. It wasn't dissimilar to a faerie's grace.

Not important right now, Fortuna. In spite of the pain I'd already put him through, here I was giving Oliver mixed signals again.

Just as I started to speak, Oliver turned and came toward me with swift, determined strides.

I knew from his expression what he was going to do, and I had a handful of seconds to stop him. But each one ticked by like a breath—in, out, in, out—and I didn't move. Then he was there, grasping the back of my neck with fingers that were gentle and firm at the same time. We met somewhere in the middle. In the instant before his mouth came down on mine, I acknowledged that I'd wanted this, too. As twisted, strange, and impossible that it was.

Oliver had never kissed me like this, not in all the years I'd known him, and I was so shocked that every thought left my head. I kissed him back automatically, because it was Ollie. But it wasn't Ollie, not completely—the boy I'd grown up with had never lifted me off the ground and wrapped my legs around his waist. Our damp clothes squeaked.

After a few seconds, or a minute, or however long his mouth had been claiming mine, Oliver pulled back. Our faces were so close that I could see the texture within his irises, lines of such a vivid blue that they looked like the water from some tropical postcard. My gaze moved lower, taking in the faint smattering of freckles over his nose. I gave in to the urge to brush my fingers over them, and even this simple touch awoke something in me that I'd worked hard to put to sleep. Oliver's eyes fluttered shut.

"Let me be clear about one thing," he said, his voice deeper than usual, a throaty promise that slid along my skin like silk. "What I feel for you is not platonic. In fact, I'd like nothing more than to rip your clothes off and fuck you right here. But I'm done pining after someone who doesn't feel the same way."

I didn't know what to say. Once again, the air between us was thick with silence and tension. After another moment, Oliver set me down and stepped away. Then, as if he hadn't just rocked my world on its axis, he straightened his shirt and ran a hand through his hair. His blue eyes

scanned the craggy mountains on either side of us. I kept staring at him, and my stomach felt like a fist inside me, clenched tight and trembling. “Ollie, I—”

He moved so quickly I didn’t even have time to blink. His shoulder connected with my stomach, and the air left my lungs as we flew. I stared past Oliver, wide-eyed, as an enormous boulder shattered against the rocks I’d just been walking past.

Oliver dove behind two boulders and set me down in the dirt. He was breathing hard, his hair hanging in his eyes. Dust floated through the air.

“What the hell was that?” I rasped, searching the sky, straining to hear any sound.

“I don’t know,” Oliver said. There was a storm in his voice and the rigid lines of his body promised violence.

Then the ground started to shake. Alarmed, I raised my gaze at the same instant the entire mountain… shifted, and I realized that what I’d thought was a craggy stone wall was something else entirely. Rocks separated and shifted, moss parting, and then dozens of figures turned around, revealing *faces*.

They had long hair and thick beards. Their ruddy skin looked uneven, rough, and after an extra beat of staring, I realized that I was seeing the ridges of scales. Every single figure held a javelin.

Giants.

Oliver slowly pulled his gun out and said from the corner of his mouth, “You need to run, Fortuna. I’ll keep our new friends occupied.”

“No fucking way,” I snapped, reaching for my own weapons.

The giants lumbered toward us. They weren’t very fast, apparently, and they still had to cross the river to get to us. “The rules have changed in this place, Fortuna,” Oliver said through his teeth. “If one of those things kills you, you could really die.”

“I’m not letting you fight a bunch of giants alone.” I took the safety off my gun and pointed at the giant closest to where we stood, but I could already tell our bullets would be useless.

Oliver had reached the same conclusion, because he was looking for another way out, a solution to these uneven odds. His attention moved to something over our heads. “I think that’s a cave,” Oliver said, nodding. “You can cover me from there. No, Fortuna, don’t. If you try to stay, I’ll let those things flatten me into a pancake.”

It wasn’t an empty threat. I knew what he was doing—getting me out of harm’s way and trying to disguise it as being helpful—but there was no more time to argue. Shooting him a glare, I relented and whirled to scrabble up the rocky slope, grabbing hold of roots and brambles as leverage. The cave mouth he’d mentioned was higher up than I’d expected.

Behind me, Oliver’s gun went off. He shouted something, the pass all around us swallowing his words.

I reached my temporary shelter without any difficulty. It was deeper than I’d expected, but I didn’t examine it further. Readying my gun again, I hovered near the edge of the rocky doorway and looked wildly for Oliver. The giants seemed to be doing the same thing. Wearing vague expressions of confusion, they communicated to each other in a series of grunts and guttural clicks. None of them noticed me, or cast a single glance toward the cave entrance. *Not fast, and not smart*, I thought.

Oliver arrived a few minutes later.

He was panting too hard to speak, sweat streaming down his neck. He must’ve led the giants on a merry chase. Relief escaped me in an audible exhale. I retreated into the shadows and took him with me, searching his body for wounds. “Thank God. I was about to—”

A long, hairy arm shot into the cave. Both of us leaped back, slamming into the jagged wall. A jolt of pain went up my spine, and I crumpled, wheezing. In my peripheral vision, I saw Oliver aim his gun again. Sound exploded in my ears, and there were three flares.

The giant yanked his arm back out, growling. The gunshots had probably felt like fire ant bites to him, but he didn’t try to grab us again.

Oliver had put his body in front of mine. His attention was still on the mouth of the cave, but my gaze dropped to the shoulder of his coat. There was a sheen to the material that didn’t belong. I sucked in a breath when I realized I was looking at blood. It had soaked through the green nylon. “You’re hurt.”

Oliver didn’t react. “It’s just a scratch.”

“Can’t you heal yourself?” I asked tightly, even though I knew the answer. Worry ping ponged through my middle, bouncing off sensitive inner walls. Suddenly the pain along my spine was easy to ignore.

Some of the tension had eased from Oliver’s posture. “I’ll work on it while you’re sleeping,” he answered, facing me at last. “Speaking of, we should make camp. I don’t think the giants will bother us while we’re in

here, but I doubt they've given up. We'll have to wait them out, unless you want to face whatever might be living down this tunnel."

"Camp," I said instantly. "Making camp sounds good."

There was a ghost of a smile in Oliver's eyes now. He pulled the backpack off his shoulders—which looked broader than usual, for some reason—and set it in the dirt. The muscles in his legs bunched as he squatted, pulling out a water canister and a bottle of lighter fluid.

"Uh, what do you think you're doing?" I questioned. Oliver cocked his head, eyebrows raised. I made a shooing motion at him. "You're *injured*. Sit your ass down and just concentrate on looking pretty. And not bleeding out, that might be important, too."

Oliver didn't try to argue, and he settled on the ground, looping his arm around his knee. *Smart man*, I thought.

A companionable silence surrounded us. I built a small fire to lend us more light, then turned my attention to the tent. Once that was finished, I went through our bags in search of the space heater, and I discovered packages of food. There was no need to eat in the dreamscape, for either of us, but I started the process of making a meal anyway. There was comfort in the routine, and after the adrenaline of facing those giants, I needed it.

I'd just poured batter onto a mini waffle maker when something moved in the dark.

My body went rigid and I reached for the knife in my boot. I paused halfway down when a familiar scent reached me. A scent I never thought I'd encounter again.

Oliver's voice, sharp and hushed, faded into the background. I was aware of nothing else except the figure in front of me. The shadows clung to her, trembling at the light of the fire, but she left them behind and stopped beside me.

"Mama?" I whispered, arching my head back to stare at her. I was still sitting on the ground.

She didn't react. Her gaze remained riveted on the entrance to the cave, her face pale and lined. She held something against her body, a child-sized bundle wrapped in a star-covered blanket. I recognized that, too. It was one of the few things I'd brought with me to the foster home, even though I'd been a bit too old for such things. I still remembered the day it vanished from my bed, probably stolen by one of the other children. I had cried myself to sleep that night, and for two weeks afterward.

We’d found one. By sheer luck—or maybe some kind of guidance from my subconscious—we’d found another memory.

I squeezed Oliver’s arm, trying to get his attention without looking away from my parents. I saw his head turn in my peripheral vision. I couldn’t focus on anything else but the other figure in the tunnel.

“Hi, Daddy,” I whispered.

He didn’t respond or look at me. I knew he couldn’t see me, of course, but I still felt a pang of hurt. There would always be that small part of me, no bigger than a sliver, that would crave Matthew Sworn’s approval.

As they passed, I caught a glimpse of my younger self, and the sight made me blink. It was disconcerting, to say the least, to see my own face as it had been then. Young, unlined, unafraid. The other Fortuna nestled against our mother’s chest, awake and silent. Suddenly I could remember that night, that moment. Mom had been so warm. Despite the fear radiating from her, it hadn’t even occurred to me to worry about where we were going or why. As long as I was with my parents, nothing bad could ever happen.

I followed them deep into the earth. Oliver was a silent presence beside me, emanating warmth.

Then we rounded a corner, and a jolt went through me when I saw someone else standing in the path. *Witch,* I thought.

The power coming off her was no joke, and she wasn’t even working a spell. Instead, she held a lantern that was covered in rust and contained a real flame. Witches might have been short-lived, but their aversion to technology was as strong as an immortal’s.

The firelight flickered over one side of her face. She was young, I noted with faint surprise. She couldn’t be older than twenty. Her hair hovered just above her shoulders, and it was dyed black, which almost made it look like a cap.

I was trying to remember her name when the witch’s gaze immediately went to me, and she frowned. After a moment, her eyes widened with outrage.

“What have you done?” she hissed. The words were thick with an accent I’d never heard before.

My father looked back with a calm expression. “One of your sisters performed a binding spell on her. She’s useless to you now, Åsa.”

“She’s promised to him!” The witch—Åsa—trembled with rage now. Her hands were fists at her sides and the wind strengthened outside, howling like some sort of snow beast.

“We made no such promise,” Dad said, his voice tight. From the corner of my eye, I saw Mom move. My gaze flicked to her, noting that she’d tightened her grip on me. My younger self was wide awake and moving her legs, as if she were trying to run and hide. She could probably sense our parents’ wariness toward this person.

“Fortuna, stay still,” Mom murmured. Her fear was so potent that I could taste it on my tongue, a flavor akin to oranges. But I fought her, squirming, and eventually she lost her hold. I ran to my father and he gave me a swift embrace, then firmly moved me back toward Mom.

The witch began to chant. She pulled a knife from her coat pocket and, with a violent jerk, opened a deep gouge in her arm. Dad’s mouth was a dark, grim slash. He handed me—the other me—to my mother and walked forward.

With no warning or hesitation, he pulled a gun from his own coat pocket and shot Åsa in the face.

A gasp stuck in my throat.

The witch’s body toppled to the ground with a dull sound. It was so degrading that I spun back to my father, expecting to see that he’d rushed forward, his face twisted with horror and remorse.

But he was walking away.

Mom and the other Fortuna were leaving, too. Terror hovered in their wake like a cloud of perfume. Just as they reached the mouth of the cave, all three figures vanished. *It’s the end of the memory*, I thought numbly.

The numbness didn’t last. Though Mom and Dad were long dead, I still felt a pang of grief, and it felt as if I’d been left behind all over again.

The silence returned. Oliver and I hadn’t moved from our place halfway down the tunnel. I was breathing hard, as if I’d just run a marathon. I glanced at the witch again, then instantly wished I hadn’t. There was a jagged, bloody hole where her features had been.

“It’s okay, Fortuna. You’re okay. Hey, look at me.”

Warm palms pressed against my cheeks. Then Oliver’s scent arrived, bringing gold-tinged memories with it. Crushed flowers, ocean spray, golden grass bending in a warm breeze. I held onto his wrists as if he was

the only thing keeping me from getting ripped away into a storm-tossed sea.

When the drowning sensation passed, I still didn't speak. Instead, I allowed myself another minute of humanity. It was important, I'd learned, to seize those opportunities. The rare, uninterrupted moments of feeling whatever I needed to feel. Like a storm taking its course or a runaway train grinding to a slow halt. Afterward, the quiet came. And I loved the quiet.

"What *was* that, Ollie?" I said finally, raising my gaze to his. "Why the hell would my dad murder someone in cold blood? What did that witch mean about me being promised to someone?"

His eyebrows were drawn together, his mouth slightly pursed, and I knew it was because he saw my pain. He saw it and felt the ache as though it were his own. "I know as much as you do. But we'll keep looking for more memories, Fortuna," he said firmly.

I started to look at the witch's body again, but Oliver's hand was still on my neck. He wouldn't let me turn my head. I didn't fight him. I barely noticed, really. I fixed my gaze on the opposite wall and mulled over the memory. "'She's useless to you now.' That's what he said. He wanted the witch to see with her own eyes—that's why they brought me. Killing her made the display pointless, though, didn't it? Maybe he panicked when she started that spell. Unless…"

My mind worked. I tried to view the scene with the perspective of the Unseelie Queen. Detached. Clinical. Peering down from every angle.

"Maybe he wanted someone else to see," I muttered, more to myself than Oliver. As soon as I heard the words out loud, I knew I was right. It was one of those truths I felt in my gut, impossible to ignore or dismiss. "Someone who was watching through her eyes."

Oliver didn't respond, probably because he knew me so well. I was still thinking quickly, applying this new information to the events of these past few weeks. No wonder the bond with the Unseelie Court had taken so long to settle after my coronation—I'd been protected by the spell. The binding. Once it was gone, my abilities had begun changing, as well. Along with Oliver and the dreamscape. The timing of everything made sense.

Thinking to tell Oliver, I refocused on him. I saw instantly that his attention had shifted, and I watched a frown tug at the corner of his mouth. Following his gaze, I turned around.

When I saw the witch standing there, alive and unharmed, it felt like my heart stopped.

"What have you done?" she demanded, exactly as she had before.

Dad's voice sounded from behind, and I spun to face him, letting out a small scream. "One of your sisters performed a binding spell on her," he said. Again, exactly as before.

That's when I put it together—the scene was on an endless loop, replaying from start to finish. In a few seconds, Dad would lift his gun and put a bullet in the witch's face.

"I can't camp in here," I blurted. Without waiting for Oliver's response, I hurried back to the place we'd left all our belongings and started taking down the tent.

He didn't try to coax me back inside or change my mind. Instead, Oliver kicked dirt over the fire we'd abandoned when the memory had started. "Do you want to go down the tunnel? Maybe it'll lead us to the other side of the pass, and we can avoid the giants altogether," he suggested.

Going down the tunnel would mean seeing that horrible scene again. But the other way would get us killed. Even though Oliver had posed it as a question, there really wasn't much choice. "Let's go," I said.

He nodded, and we finished breaking camp down. Wearing my backpack once again, I swallowed a weary sigh, turning toward that yawning darkness. There was a *click*, and suddenly the tunnel brightened —Oliver had turned on a flashlight. But the small glow did nothing to alleviate my panicked heart.

"Once more unto the breach, dear friend," I muttered. I took a breath and followed him into the depths of my messed up mind. The passage from the poem resounded through me like a benediction.

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more.

Oliver and I couldn't have gone more than a mile when the tunnel came to an abrupt end.

"Holy shit," I said, awed.

We stood at the bottom of a cavern so towering, so vast that I felt like an ant, peering up at the world through tiny, inconsequential eyes. The walls were gray, uneven stone, with veins of ice running through them as if it were gold. I had no idea where the light was coming from—it seemed to shine from the ice itself—but it lit the colossal space as if we were above ground.

The ice's glow also shone along the surface of the long, glassy pool stretching through most of the cave.

There was something at the other end of the cavern, I realized as I finished my perusal of this surreal place. A bright, golden glow. We'd need to cross the water to see what was causing it. Conveniently, there was a boat a few yards away. It looked like someone had dragged it up the sand long ago and the vessel was still waiting for its master's return, lilting onto its side like a mournful frown.

"You know there's going to be something in the water, right?" Oliver said. He'd probably seen my gaze linger on that distant light, then move to the boat.

The corners of my mouth tightened in resignation. "Are you going to sit this one out?"

Oliver didn't grace this with a response. He just adjusted the weight of his backpack and started in the direction of the small, sad boat. I hurried after him, touching both of my weapons in reassurance.

Once we'd gotten the vessel upright and in the lake, Oliver pushed the boat a little more, then hauled himself inside the moment we had enough momentum. Touching the water as little as possible, I thought with a twinge of unease. It didn't help that our newfound boat was incredibly prone to swaying. I held onto the edges and searched the glassy surface around us, praying I wouldn't spot a single ripple. Oliver found a pair of oars and handed one to me.

"Row fast," he said. He didn't need to tell me twice. We dipped our oars into the eerily still lake. I held my breath, waiting for something to leap out at us. When nothing happened, I relaxed a bit and added some strength to the push and pull. I kept my eyes on that unexplained source of light.

We hadn't gotten far when something struck the wood beneath our feet.

I jumped and nearly dropped the oar. Oliver started to speak, but a moment later, the stillness shattered with noise, a blood-curdling blend of

shrieks, yowls, and shouts. The sounds bounced off the walls and made them even sharper, longer. It was the eeriest symphony I'd ever heard, and I knew my eyes were wide as I looked at Oliver. He looked back grimly.

We rowed faster. Waves raced over the water.

"Sirens?" Oliver questioned, his voice overly calm while my skin had gone clammy with fear.

"No. They don't sound like that." Rowing even harder, I mentally ran through every water-related creature in Mom's books and stories. Scylla? Charybdis?

As if the creature were trying to answer me, it hit the bottom again, this time with such force that the entire boat tipped.

My scream became a wet gurgle as we hit the water.

There was no chance to react, though. A second after I found myself in the warm, wet darkness, something grabbed me. I felt a solid weight around my shoulders before my body flew upward.

I was screaming again when I emerged from the lake. The creepy noises still came from every direction. From the dim lighting that still shone on the other end of the cavern, I was able to make out the creature's wingspan, which was so huge that I could feel every beat flap as we rose higher, higher, higher into the darkness. Whatever held my arms—all I could see when I wrenched my head back was the swell of a round, fur-covered belly—was probably carrying me off to a quiet place where it could feed.

"Ollie!" I yelled, my voice echoing.

"Fortuna!"

Relief filled my chest at his answering shout. I couldn't see him, but at least I knew he was alive. For how much longer, though? I had to do something. Had to take action. *Think, Fortuna*. There was no way to reach the weapons in my backpack. Any biting or scratching would be ineffectual against an animal of this size.

I was still trying to come up with a plan when the creature dropped me.

Instinct kicked in, and my body moved without any commands from my fear-frozen brain. Though I had no idea how far we were from the ground, I landed on my feet. I threw my arms out to fight for balance, wobbling at the hard impact. The noise was so loud it was painful now, not just echoes anymore, but cries mere yards away. I looked up automatically,

and as my eyes adjusted, I was slow to register what I was seeing. It was too strange, even for me.

There was a city amongst the stalactites. An entire underground collection of oddly-shaped structures made of stone. I could see windows, pathways, steps, stretching across the length of the space, both on the ceiling and along the ground. There were two enormous caves, stacked on top of one another. The one below held the water and the memory, and this one held all the imaginary creatures my mind had created to keep me from it.

The imaginary creatures that, like the minotaurs and the cetus, now surrounded me on every side.

Before I could decide what to do next, the swarm of creatures surged forward, pushing and prodding me with jabs that were none-too-gentle. I discovered that I'd lost my weapons at some point, so I resorted to fighting with my fists and feet, lashing out at the ones that got too close. There were so many of them, their features so strange, and only my strict lessons with Adam kept me alive. But they had me by sheer numbers—while I fought a creature with three heads, two more came up from behind. Tentacles lashed out, wrapping around my wrists, throat, and legs. Before I could react, the slimy appendages yanked with terrifying strength, making me slam down on my knees with a teeth-gritting *crack.*

At the same moment I fell, I heard a bellow of rage. The sound of it made me jerk around. *Ollie.*

"Stop," someone else said, the command ringing out. This voice was feminine, and strong.

And with that single word, the entire cavern went silent.

Shaking, I raised my gaze. A wide set of damp, half-broken stairs rose up before the horde. Oliver stood at the halfway point, his back against the chest of a terrifying bat-like creature. A finger-sized talon was being held against the hollow of my friend's throat. Surprisingly, Oliver's gaze wasn't on me—he was looking at the creatures that had touched me. I'd never seen such ferocity in his eyes before.

But what caught my attention was the female standing above all of us.

At the top of the stairs, there was a flat surface. A platform, of sorts, except it had been made by the elements instead of someone's hands. That was where this bizarre queen stood, if 'stood' was the right word for it. She had thick, black hair that hung to her waist. She wore no clothing, and

her bare breasts gleamed in the firelight. Her skin had a subtle green tint to it. Leathery wings rose up behind her, the tips ending in black talons.

Where legs should've been was the body of a snake.

Like a snake, I knew this creature devoured her victims alive, and I hid a rush of revulsion and fear. As if she could hear my thoughts, the female smiled, revealing black and pointed teeth.

"Echidna," I breathed. The Mother of Monsters.

Now I looked at the creatures around me with dawning comprehension. They were her children. Or descendants of her children, because some of the monsters around me bore traits that belonged to Chimaera. The Gorgons. Lernaean Hydra.

"Use the gun," Oliver said, drawing my attention back to him. There was no trace of fear in his voice. Killing Echidna would probably send her children into chaos, and we could use that to get away.

I tried to make my shrug nonchalant, but the way I was still trembling ruined the effect. "Lost it, I'm afraid."

"A gun would not harm me," Echidna told Oliver. He snarled and tried to run at her, but the winged creature held him fast.

As he went still again, I caught several of the females around us giving Oliver appreciative looks. Frowning, I refocused on my best friend, and that was when I noticed how his white shirt clung to every plane of smooth skin and ridge of muscle. Fury blazed in his eyes and the tension in his body promised violence.

Possession clanged through me, loud and jarring as a bell.

Ollie was *mine*.

There was a dog-like creature near me—I saw Cerberus in its hunched shape, lips curled back to reveal the flames burning inside it—and it snarled. I resisted the ridiculous urge to snarl back. I swung around, facing Echidna again.

"You're here to guard the memory, right?" I demanded. Her eyes glittered, and that seemed to be the only response I'd get. I ignored the fear pounding in my throat and went on, "I am the one who asked you to protect it. Thank you for your diligence. But… I'm finally ready to remember again. I need you to let me pass, and let my friend go."

It felt like the entire underground city fell silent.

"I will free him," Echidna declared at last, and I struggled not to show my rush of relief. Then she added, "In exchange for three truths."

I didn’t hesitate. Impatience leaked into my voice as I answered, speaking over Oliver, “Fine. Yes. Deal.”

“Very well. Here is my first question. Why does it matter so much to you, reaching this memory?” the goddess asked. I opened my mouth the second she was finished, but Echidna held up a long finger, stopping me from blurting the answer forming in my head. “Ah, ah. We will know if you lie. If you lie, I will kill your heart.”

My heart? I started to question her, but I figured it out on my own. Oliver. She meant Oliver.

“I…” My throat had dried from the heat of my fear and rage. I wanted to kill this bitch on the spot for threatening him. I swallowed, knowing the only way to get Oliver back safely was just to play her game. But I hadn’t admitted, even to myself, the true answer to this question.

“Talk to me,” Oliver said suddenly.

Frowning, I tore my gaze away from Echidna. “What?”

“Don’t look at her. Look at me. Tell *me* why it’s so important to you,” Oliver urged softly. The stillness in the cavern was so absolute that his voice floated down to my ears, even with the distance between us.

It felt like there was a small army in my stomach, shouting and fighting and stomping. Breathing raggedly, I stared into Oliver’s blue eyes. He smiled as if we were the only two people in the room.

“There’s more than one reason,” I said, holding onto that image—the two of us alone, facing each other on an ice-slickened staircase made of black rock. I swallowed and continued, “The biggest one, though, is that I just wanted to see more of them. My parents. I loved them more than anything else in this world, and even seeing them in a flashback was better than not seeing them at all. And I felt guilty that I’d let myself forget what they looked like.”

Another image flashed in my mind. Kneeling over my mother’s body, moonlight from the other end of the hallway making the pale bones of her rib cage gleam. Whenever I tried to remember their faces, *that* was what I saw.

“Second question,” Echidna announced, startling me and Oliver. Still using that matter-of-fact tone, the goddess pointed at him and asked, “Do you want to fuck this pretty male?”

“Wh-why would you want to know that?” I stammered.

One corner of her mouth tipped up in a wry smile. *You know why,* that smile said. Because this creature had been designed to hurt me. Drive me away. Stand between me and this memory by any means, including emotional warfare. And with every second that passed, I was losing.

"Yes," I ground out. I kept my gaze on Echidna to avoid Oliver's reaction, but my face was on fire.

"Last question," the Mother of Monsters purred. I waited, showing no expression. Somewhere nearby, a dripping sound echoed. Then Echidna tossed down her final challenge, her words joining with the dark. "What are you most afraid of?"

I almost smiled.

The answer to this one was easy. If she'd thought to trick or shame me, Echidna had gravely miscalculated. I met the female's gaze, feeling as cold as the ice beneath my feet. I didn't flinch as I said, "Myself."

Displeasure spread across the goddess's face, and silence fell like an ax. Echidna's slitted eyes bored into mine as if she were searching for something. *She thought I would lie,* I realized, watching her.

Then, moving faster than my eyes could track, Echidna surged down the stairs. She shoved me, hard, and I went flipping into darkness—there had been a hole next to the place I'd been standing. A huge hole hidden by shadow. The shrieks and roars of Echidna's children followed me down.

As I hurtled toward the glassy lake, I registered that a bright-haired figure was falling beside me. *Ollie.*

Then we were hitting the water again. Sinking down again. Kicking to air again. When my head broke the surface, it was quiet, those terrible noises nothing more than a bad dream. Oliver and I moved close to each other, but neither of us spoke. Our movements were soundless and urgent.

This time, nothing came from above or below as we headed for the other side of the cavern. Within a minute Oliver and I dragged ourselves up the slanted shore, our chests heaving. The backpack against me felt like it weighed a hundred pounds.

Once I was able to lift my head, I instantly discovered the source of the light we'd seen.

It was the strangest, most haunting tree grove I'd ever seen. Gold glittered everywhere I looked. The bark of every trunk we passed was so solid-looking, so brightly gleaming, that I wondered if they were actually

made of gold. The honeyed hue was only enhanced by the layer of snow that also draped over everything.

"Wow," Oliver murmured at last. "Your head is a beautiful place, Fortuna Sworn."

"Thanks, I think," I murmured back. I didn't even remember the moment we'd started walking.

Then it rose up in front of us like one of the giants. It was the only tree in the grove that wasn't gold. There wasn't a single speck of it along the ground, leaves, or branches. There was no snow along its branches, either, as if this eerie thing didn't adhere to the rules of dreams.

It was the same tree I'd dreamed about, while I was human, and the one Oliver had already led me to within the dreamscape. It was identical to the other one we'd seen in almost every way—the twisted branches, the gnarled bark.

But there was one detail that was vastly different.

Standing around the tree, gently aglow from a mermaid lamp, were walls. Two pink walls with furniture propped up against them. I hadn't laid eyes on it in years, but I recognized the place instantly.

It all looked like the set of some strange, fairy tale play.

Frost and snow glittered behind my childhood bedroom. There were three figures, one sitting upright in the bed, her spine leaning against the headboard, and the other two perched on the edge of the mattress. Once again, I realized I was looking at my younger self. My arm was in a cast. I'd broken it, I remembered suddenly. I'd tumbled out of that huge tree and hit the ground too hard. Thankfully, I hadn't had to wear the cast long, due to my Fallen blood.

It was obvious my other self was upset about something; her lower lip trembled and her other hand had fisted into the bedspread.

"You did nothing wrong," Mom told her gently.

"But the roof," the other Fortuna said in a small voice, casting her eyes upward. I looked up, too, thinking there would only be the ceiling of the cavern we stood in. But now there *was* a roof above them, and it had been completely decimated by the twisted tree. Jagged pieces of wood, broken plaster, and scraps of shingles littered the ground around its base.

That's because it's real, I thought with another rush of remembrance. The strange tree wasn't just part of this grove in my dreamscape—it had

literally sprouted in my bedroom. For weeks after that, Damon and I had been forced to share his while the repairs were being made.

Dad made a dismissive gesture. “A roof can be fixed.”

“We only care about you, sweetheart,” Mom added. She paused, and uncertainty flitted across her face. “Can you tell us how you did it?”

“I don’t know,” the younger Fortuna whimpered. “I was sleeping, I swear. I had a dream about the game.”

“The game?” Dad echoed, frowning.

“The one Damon and I play.”

“Ah, I see.” Dad’s expression cleared. He exchanged a glance with my mom that I couldn’t decipher, even now, and then he suggested, “Why don’t you sleep with Damon tonight? It’ll get cold in here soon.”

The other Fortuna nodded. Dad bent over and, careful not to jostle my cast, scooped me into his arms. He carried me through the open door. But apparently Damon, his bedroom, and none of the furniture were part of this memory, because it looked as if my father was setting me down mid-air when we reached the bed.

“There was a noise,” I heard Damon’s voice say.

Our mother made a soothing sound and sat beside him, or where I imagined he was. Dad went about tucking invisible blankets in more firmly around our small bodies, and Mom moved to kiss our foreheads. Then they were telling us to get some sleep and they’d be right down the hall if we needed them.

Adult me stood there, in the shadows, observing with a lump in my throat.

The girl in that bed was so infuriatingly clueless, and suddenly I had to suppress the urge to shake her. She didn’t know what was coming, or that she should cherish nights like this. Her parents had started teaching her how to protect herself when she was five years old, because that was the reality of being a Nightmare. Nothing would prepare her for losing them, though.

Though the memory seemed to be at an end, my younger self genuinely appearing to fall asleep, Oliver and I didn’t move.

It was a good thing we didn’t, because a few seconds later, we watched the other Fortuna creep from a bed we still couldn’t see. I wasn’t surprised when she opened the door and crawled down the hallway—eavesdropping was an interest I’d developed early in life.

“Typical,” Oliver said under his breath, bumping me with his shoulder. I gave him a watery smile before I turned back to the surreal play.

We still couldn’t see other walls or rooms, but I knew my younger self was heading toward the kitchen, which was on the other end of the house. She slowly poked her face around the corner. Dad was on his knees, picking up shards of a broken wine glass. He must’ve dropped it when they heard the roof shattering.

The glass slid into a trash bin, and then Dad turned to face Mom. “It’s time,” he said.

Christine Sworn didn’t answer. She just blinked rapidly, her lips pursed. In that moment, it fully hit me, how much I resembled her. I’d stared at myself in the mirror while I was trying not to cry—my face looked exactly like Mom’s did now.

“She’s seven years old,” she said finally. “She’s only seven.”

Dad looked like he was in pain. “And if she’s this powerful now, imagine what it’ll be like once she hits puberty.”

And with that, like the final scene to a play, the memory went dark. I stayed where I was, staring at nothing. I could still see my parents standing there, the air ripe with their dread.

“This is what sent them to Tamar’s,” I said, feeling dazed.

My abilities had been so potent that I was causing things to happen. My fear had been trickling into reality. There was nothing that could’ve prepared Mom and Dad for it—such unchecked power was unheard of in a child.

Oliver put his hand on my shoulder. “Fortuna?”

“What was your technique again? No, wait, don’t tell me,” I said abruptly. My mind loosened as I remembered, as if it had been twisting into anxious knots. “Picture the worst possible outcome. That’s what you told me. Damn, I really should’ve tried it. I wasn’t ready for this, Ollie.”

My voice broke.

I told myself it was just the stress of this endless night, but then Oliver put his arms around me. He rested his chin on top of my head. I waited for him to say something, because this was Oliver. He always knew the perfect way to offer comfort. But he stayed silent.

Something about that silence was my undoing.

I pressed my face into Oliver’s chest and started to cry. I cried in a way I hadn’t let myself since that day next to the garage, when Laurie had been

the one holding me. The sobs wracked my entire body. Through it all, Oliver still didn't speak.

Eventually the sobs faded into hiccups, and the hiccups gave way to a hollow silence. My cheek rested against the front of Oliver's damp shirt and I stared toward the trees without seeing them; I was picturing the expression on my parents' faces again.

"They were scared of me," I whispered.

Oliver tightened his hold, as if he could use his body to shield me from the pain. "You don't know that."

"I do, though. I can't even blame them. Somehow, I was manifesting…" I sucked in a shocked breath when I remembered those creatures. Those red-eyed hounds that had appeared in the woods during one of my jogs. Finn and I had killed them. The incident felt like a lifetime ago, and so much had happened since then that I'd tucked it away, always meaning to go back to it. Wonder where those things had come from.

There was still no other way to explain them. This was the piece I'd been missing, the knowledge I'd been seeking when I asked Dracula about the forgotten stories of my kind.

Somehow, my own fears had the capability of becoming reality.

What if… what if I could use this? I had no idea how that part of my abilities worked, or whether there were unforeseen consequences to using it, but that didn't matter. Any of it.

Could it be possible to make Oliver part of my world? To bring him into the living, breathing, real place he'd been painting for as long as he'd existed?

In that moment, I imagined a future I'd only allowed myself to picture during my weakest moments. Oliver, standing across from me, not as an impossible dream, but as a surreal reality. Oliver, waking up beside me in the bed I'd fallen asleep in. Oliver, fucking me in the shower as he got ready for the day. Oliver, flashing his shy, crooked grin as he rushed off to whatever life he'd chosen for himself—art school, maybe, or working in a job that focused on helping people. Oliver, waiting for me at the end of an aisle, wearing a suit and my family standing all around. Oliver, holding my hand in a delivery room while I fought to birth the family we'd created together.

The pain struck me with the force of lightning, because it had become instinct, to feel this pain after allowing myself to think of the life we would never have.

Then I remembered what I'd learned tonight.

Hope flared inside me, and the force of it felt as if fireworks were erupting within my rib cage.

"Fortuna? What can I do? Talk to me. Please."

I could tell from his concerned expression that Oliver hadn't even considered what this new ability meant. That thinking of his own gain wouldn't have even crossed his mind. And I wondered, not for the first time, how I had managed to create someone so pure in the darkest parts of me.

"I love you," I said, the words coming more freely than they ever had before. They just… spilled out of me like a dam within my heart had broken.

A frown hovered at the edges of Oliver's mouth. "I love you, too."

All I wanted was to tell him what I was thinking, but something this big needed to be processed. What if I got his hopes up only to crush them later? What if I was wrong about this? I forced myself to take subtle, even breaths through my nose. That jittery feeling left me with every exhale.

Once I felt calmer, I lifted my head and met Oliver's gaze. We were still on the ground, our knees touching. Our faces were so close I could feel his breath on my cheek. "Would it be okay if we stopped for the night?" I asked. "I should really get some REM sleep."

"Of course," Oliver said instantly, but his frown hadn't faded. "This grove is big enough that we can find a site far away from this memory. Preferably not close to the water, though."

I nodded, and he helped me up. Oliver never let go of my hand as we ventured away from the memory of my parents. Within minutes, we found a good spot. Oliver and I slid off our backpacks in perfect unison, neither of us saying a word, and started setting up camp.

As we built the tent, I caught Oliver looking up more than once. He was worried Echidna's children would come back, I thought. We went inside our small shelter, and Oliver confirmed my suspicions by muttering, "At least we've got some branch cover. We'll hear it if they try to come from above."

“Don’t worry, I’ll protect you,” I reassured him, but the words came out more suggestive than I meant them to. I’d been trying to keep it light, teasing. I needed some normality after all of tonight’s terror and emotional upheaval.

We both let our backpacks drop to the ground, another part of our routine, but Oliver’s expression had become strange. When I saw that, guilt drove out everything else I felt. What was I doing? I’d put him through enough. Oliver didn’t deserve to be treated like a toy, played with whenever I got bored or nostalgic. I withdrew into myself like a creature into a shell, adding, “We’ll have to use the space heater to dry our stuff again, huh?”

Oliver unrolled his sleeping bag. He didn’t look up at me as he said, “Hey, Fortuna?”

“Yeah?”

“So you want to fuck me, huh?”

His tone was casual, but I still froze. “Oh, God. Listen, Ollie—”

He grinned and waved his hand. “We don’t have to talk about it. I realized how badly I treated you before I left. All that said, though… it’s just nice. Knowing that what I felt wasn’t completely unreciprocated.”

My embarrassment faded, and a small, sad smile curved my lips.

“No,” I told Oliver, adding my sleeping bag next to his. “No, it wasn’t unreciprocated.”

After that, we got undressed and set our clothes near the heater. Each of us got into our polyester cocoons, and I quickly learned there would be no sleep for me tonight. Thoughts shot through my mind like bullets, impossible to stop. Oliver breathed behind me, and I listened to every exhale with the thrilling, terrifying realization that, someday, this could be happening. He could actually be sleeping beside me in my world. The biggest obstacle standing in our way might just… vanish.

But where would it leave them, if you made Oliver real? that vicious little voice asked me.

Two faces flashed through my mind. One with silver eyes and a wicked grin. The other with dark hair and a solemn gaze.

As much as I wanted to dismiss that I’d considered Collith, pretend that it was just a moment of exhaustion, I couldn’t. He mattered. He had left a mark on me.

Mark. Spell. Bind. I was Alice, falling down the rabbit hole, flailing through the darkness, unable to catch hold of anything. Except the objects around me were thoughts and memories.

She's promised to him!

Åsa's voice screeched through my head, and I grimaced. What *had* she meant by that? There was so much I didn't know. Not just whether I could bring Oliver into the real world, but about the past. About the parents I'd loved and lost too soon. What sort of promise had they made, and why did it lead them to that red door? I tossed and turned.

Oliver's arms came around me again.

Before I could tell him it was useless, I heard it. Music. It seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere all at once, gentle, subtle. The faint melody sounded like hope.

"Are you doing this?" I asked faintly. Oliver didn't answer, which was answer enough. Concern gripped me. "You shouldn't, Ollie. You should save your strength."

"Don't worry about me. Just listen, Fortuna."

I could tell from his tone that any arguments I made would fall on deaf ears. Giving in far too easily, I sighed and closed my eyes. Oliver kept using what little power he had left to make me a lullaby. The horrific things I'd seen tonight were replaced by images the notes provoked. Cherry blossoms. Rain. Mist over distant mountains.

Within seconds, I fell asleep.

But when I woke up on the other side of reality once more, I swore I could still hear the music, playing faintly from the part of my soul where Oliver lived.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lights flicked on and buzzed overhead.

As the insides of my eyelids turned red, Oliver's music faded. I'd been trying to come awake gradually, but now I was aware of the scratchy couch beneath me. The lights were still buzzing, too. I peeled my eyes open one at a time. *Ouch*.

I was in the waiting room at Adam's shop, I realized slowly. The owner himself turned the lock on the door, then flipped the light switch next to it. A sign flickered to life in the window.

"Did I seriously sleep an entire day?" I asked, squinting.

"Day and a half, actually. Must've needed it. But the drinking probably didn't help."

"Probably not," I agreed. Adam must've been getting a late start, too, if he was just opening. I sat up and searched for my phone, biting back a moan. "Emma must be worried sick. Oh, God, I was supposed to be bugging everyone for their hourly updates."

"Your family is fine. The werewolf told them you were here. If you want to keep sleeping, you can use my bed."

The offer made me smile. Something wistful and weary stole over my thoughts. "I wonder what my life would be like if we'd kept dating," I mused.

"Wouldn't have worked," Adam said, pulling up the shades. They made a metallic sound.

Sunlight poured inside and I shielded my eyes. "Why not?"

"I like the quiet. You're not quiet." The corners of the vampire's mouth deepened, not quite a smile, but as close to one as Adam could get. I knew

he was trying to soften his words; he hadn't meant them as an insult.

"I wouldn't mind a quiet life," I protested.

Adam just walked out, leaving the door open behind him. I waited for that familiar heavy metal to blare through the stillness, but after a few moments, I only heard the clink of tools. It took another moment to realize that Adam was working without music in case I took him up on the offer to sleep in his room. The vampire really was thoughtful, in his own way.

Tempting as it was to stay here and hide from everything I didn't want to face, I needed to go home. I had to check on my family, and I desperately wanted to brush my teeth. Biting back a yawn, I found my gym bag and the keys to the van. They glinted in my hand as I bent to write on a sticky pad resting on top of Adam's desk. *Thank you.* I set the pen down where I'd found it and left.

I blasted music the entire way back.

As soon as the homestead came into view, I took stock of the cars parked out front. Damon had left for the day, but Emma's vehicle was in its usual spot. The moment I got out and slammed the door shut, I noticed a figure crossing the driveway. He was obviously just leaving; he held keys in his hand and his sunrise hair was still damp from the shower. I stopped, my eyes widening. "Cyrus," I said. "Cyrus, I've been meaning to—"

"I don't want an apology," he said.

I blinked at the interruption. "What?"

"You blame yourself," Cyrus asserted, his expression strangely calm. "You always blame yourself. But I made a choice, too. I'm an adult and I knew what I was doing."

A thousand responses clogged my throat. *I guilted you into doing it. I took advantage of your kind heart. I put myself first.* I still longed to say the words, but was it for Cyrus's sake… or mine? As we stood there, I resisted the urge to embrace him. Cyrus disliked being touched even more than I did. "Can we hang out soon? Maybe watch an episode of that show you like?" I said after a pause.

His eyes brightened. "*Succession*?" he replied. "Yes, we left off on episode six, season two."

I smiled. A real smile. "Great. Text me the nights you're free."

Cyrus nodded, muttered a swift goodbye, and walked to his car. He'd forgiven me so easily, I thought. Cyrus Lavender was proof of the good left in this world. Still smiling, I slipped inside the barn and ascended the

stairs to the loft. Stanley came around the corner to greet me, his tail wagging so hard that it affected the rest of his body. If he was here, Cyrus must've had a long shift ahead of him at the bar. I scratched behind the dog's ear and kept going up.

A few steps later, the air began to reek of ketchup and meat. I recognized the smell, and then there came the hollow sound of china being placed upon wood. *Oh, shit*. My stomach curled in dread.

Emma's meatloaf.

For an instant I considered slinking off to my room. But then I heard her voice drift down the stairwell, "Fortuna?"

Trying not to drag my feet, I nudged Stanley out of the way with my knee and entered the kitchen. I drew closer to the island, setting my bag on the floor. An empty bottle of vodka shone in a ray of sunlight, catching my eye. I didn't remember leaving it there. Frowning, I started to apologize to Emma. Then she turned. When I saw her expression, I went silent, my throat thick with guilt. The bottle had been put there on purpose.

Emma turned from the stove, holding a glass pan. She didn't look at me as she came closer and put it down. She pursed her lips at the bottle, driving her point home. "I can't lose you, sweetheart," she whispered. "I don't think I would survive it."

It felt like someone had rammed a butcher knife into my heart. I thought of the day I'd just spent at Adam's, and the feeling worsened. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'll try harder, okay? I'm going to get better," I swore.

Falling silent, Emma scooped some meatloaf onto a plate and placed it in front of me. At this proximity, the smell was overwhelming. "I made lunch," she said.

I plastered a grin on my face and reached for the fork she'd brought. "I see that. Thank you, Ems."

The old woman mustered a smile, too, and nodded. She pressed her hand on my shoulder before she walked away, heading for her room. I stared at the steam rolling off the meatloaf in front of me, clutching the fork tightly. Stanley rested his big head on my thigh, looking up with pitiful, drooping eyes. Whispering not to tell Emma, I set the plate on the floor and fled.

I was about to disappear into my own room when I noticed Nym's open door. Curious, I wandered toward it. Hello followed me down the hallway, and she darted through the opening when I poked my head into Nym's

room. The faerie sat on the bed, his back resting against the headboard. His bare feet peeked out from the hems of too-long jeans, and there was a sketchpad propped against his legs. His thin arm moved in quick, rough strokes.

"I need to ask you something," I said, startling myself.

As my words floated between us, Nym made a dismissive sound. Hello jumped up and curled into a ball against his thigh. "Muddy water is best cleared by leaving it alone," he replied.

I ventured closer, peering around at the drawings on the walls. They seemed to be getting darker—several of them depicted a hulking shape, surrounded by smears of darkness that were either flames or shadows, I couldn't tell which. I wanted to ask about these, too, but one question burned brightest in my mind.

"Have you ever looked into my past, Nym? Maybe when Collith was trying to find me?" I blurted.

Nym shook his head, moving his pencil more vigorously. I'd clearly agitated him. I began to retreat, nodding.

"Okay. I do have one more question, though." I released a slow breath, pausing. "Do you trust him? Collith?"

Once again, the faerie gave no answer. His pencil scratched over the paper. He seemed to be jabbing at it now. My shoulders slumped, and I turned back to the door, worried that I'd made a mistake in inviting Nym to come here.

"No one is completely trustworthy," he said, the suddenness of his voice startling. I turned again, but Nym looked past me, his eyes hazy. "Not in this game. But of all the players on the board, His Majesty is the one I choose to stand beside. That means something, doesn't it?"

Quick as that, he sounded like a child again. He met my gaze, imploring, and sadness for him breathed over my heart. Would Nym ever recover from what had been done to him? "Yes. Yes, it means something," I said.

I left the faerie alone after that, closing his door with a gentle click. But later that afternoon, after waking from a restless nap, I discovered a new drawing on my bedroom floor. I bent and picked it up slowly, tracing the image over and over with my eyes. I touched the gray lines with awe.

It was a portrait of… me. The face that I saw in every mirror. But in this picture, I stood atop a hill, wearing full armor, a sword clutched in my

hand. My hair streamed in the wind. I was surrounded by werewolves, faeries, humans, and even a dragon. I was everything fierce and certain and beautiful that I'd always dreamed of being.

It wasn't a mistake to bring Nym here, I thought, sending a silent thanks to the faerie.

I hung the drawing on the wall, and that was the moment this room truly started to feel like mine.

I took a short, restless nap. So restless that I dreamed of nothing except faded, distant images that had no meaning. When I woke again, I dragged myself into the bathroom and showered. As I dressed, I practiced what I would say to Bea tonight. No more avoiding, I decided. It was time.

Out in the loft, Nym was now watching one of Matt's TV shows. The dreaded meatloaf was gone, probably tucked away in our refrigerator, but there was no sign of the person who'd made it. I hurried past Nym and reached for my coat, saying over my shoulder, "Have a good night!"

"Fortuna," he said.

Hearing my name from Nym's mouth was disconcerting. I halted, facing him again. "Yeah? Is everything okay?"

"These youth do not understand," he informed me, clearly agitated. He pointed at the screen. "Fairy tales do not teach children that faeries are real. Children already believe we are not real."

"You know, why don't you watch something else?" I suggested. I started to close the door behind me.

"Fortuna," Nym said again. Hiding a burst of impatience, I spun again. He stared at me with wide, earnest eyes, and whatever I'd been about to say faded. Nym sounded like every chilling moment in a horror movie as he told me, "Fairy tales teach children that what is not real may still hurt them."

"*Okay*. No more PBS for you, Nym."

I rushed over to change the channel, and I left Nym with the remote in his hand, giving him stern instructions to change it again if he got upset. One minute later, I was on the road.

I was almost to town when I realized I'd been followed.

Whoever was driving the beat-up car behind me wasn't being subtle about it—they wanted me to be aware of what was happening. My pursuer's front bumper came close that I steeled myself to feel a lurch. I strained to see the driver's face in my rear view mirror, but it was too dark. Was this a warning? A taunt, just before they moved in for the kill?

Too close, I thought. *My family is too close to this. You made a mistake coming here.*

I decided to face this enemy head on.

Gathering power to me, I slowed the van to a stop and threw it into park. My headlights beamed into the night. I swung out of the car, holding my hands up to show that I wasn't holding any weapons. This stranger wouldn't know how meaningless the gesture was—I kept my weapons hidden like a smart person.

I felt a flicker of surprise when I recognized the figure coming toward me.

Or, more accurately, when I recognized the artificial horns sticking out of his head—it was the goblin from the oubliette. I'd also freed him at the black market.

"You have ten seconds to explain yourself," I called.

His voice floated back, carrying over the sound of our running engines. "I am Seth of the bloodline Arthion. I was exiled from the Seelie Court five years ago, which is how I came to be in a werewolf pack's possession when our paths first crossed."

I cocked my head. "Why did your people exile you?"

"For daring to want a different body than the one I was born in," Seth answered. There was no hint of bitterness in his voice, but pain haunted his eyes. He took a step closer.

I frowned as I tried to figure out his meaning. *The horns?* I thought, nonplussed.

Seth must've seen my confusion. All the feeling left his face as he added, "I was once called Sofía."

I understood, then, and my dislike of the Seelie Court increased. At this rate, the Unseelie Court was looking downright homey. "And why are you following me, Seth of the bloodline Arthion, formerly of the Seelie Court?" I asked, genuine curiosity stirring in my chest.

"Because there are rumors about you," the goblin answered. "Rumors that you protect people. When you saved me at the black market, I knew it

to be true."

"Apparently you haven't heard the news—I'm no longer queen of anything. I'm not in a position to protect anyone these days. I'm sorry." I turned and started to walk away.

Seth's voice followed me. "You took a chance on the vampire!"

I stopped, gritting my teeth. *Don't fall for it, Fortuna*. I spun back around and demanded, "What are you talking about?"

"The one with the bleach-blond hair. He's new—I've been learning everything I could about you, and he's not in any of the stories or accounts. Which means you brought him in, accepted him, without knowing much about him."

"I bound him to me," I said bluntly. "Using our blood and the vows of fealty from my coronation ceremony. I can't just take you at your word, Seth. Not when it could put my family at risk. I'm sorry."

I *was* sorry. I looked at this goblin, and I wanted to trust him. To bring him into the fold and prevent another person in this lonely world from being alone. But in the end, I turned away. He was a stranger, and my family was vulnerable. I had started thinking less of what I wanted and more of what would keep them safe.

"What if I did the same? Swore a Blood Vow to you?" Seth called. Once again, I turned to face him.

"That's not what it's…" I stopped and shook my head. It didn't matter what it was called or that, on his lips, it sounded like something honorable. Coveted. Worthy. I just repeated, "I'm sorry."

Before I turned for the third time, I saw Seth's expression shutter, and a stone of guilt and shame dropped into my stomach. It made me feel heavy as I got back in the van and drove away.

Minutes later, I parked outside Bea's. I crossed the street and dropped my keys in my purse. Footsteps sounded behind me, coming closer. Thinking it was Seth again, I spun around, scowling. "Okay, look, now this is getting—"

A cherubim rushed at me.

Somehow, I managed not to scream. My reaction was fumbling but effective, and I landed a solid kick to the creature's chest, using its own momentum. It reared back and made a sound of surprise—it clearly hadn't expected me to fight back. Worried now, the head shaped like a man looked upward. Following its gaze, I swung around. Something moved in

the distance, like a flock of birds against the horizon. *No, not birds,* I thought with slow horror.

It was more of Belanor's creatures, coming this way. Their appearance meant they knew who I was, despite the goblin ring on my finger. Everything was happening exactly as Laurie had said it would. Oh, I *hated* it when he was right.

As the cherubim I'd been fighting launched into the air to rejoin its flock, I pictured them in Bea's, killing and destroying everything, and I felt a wave of déjà vu. I'd seen this movie before, but this time, it would have a different ending. I had to lead them away from the bar.

And backup. I'd need a lot of backup.

As I crossed the street, I took my phone out of my pocket and unlocked the screen. I selected a name on my contacts list.

He answered on the fourth ring. "What's wrong?"

That was Adam for you—he didn't waste time or words. "Feel like doing some training?" I asked. "I've got a few test dummies for us. They're seconds behind me; I'm leading them somewhere a little more secluded. Gil is invited, too."

"Be right there," the vampire said.

"Great. Oh, and Adam? Bring the sword." I hung up without saying anything else, knowing he'd done the same. I hurried across the train tracks and toward Fraser River, where there was more tree cover. Once I arrived, I spun to face the oncoming flock, chanting their names under my breath. "Laurelis. Collith. Lyari."

They arrived one by one, seconds apart. First, Collith. Then, Laurie. And last, Lyari.

She looked to the sky and immediately unsheathed her sword. The shimmering transparency of the blade was like glass. Whatever they were made of, though, didn't shatter—it cut. Collith and Laurie also held swords. They, too, were focused on the horizon now.

"Trouble seems to follow wherever you go," a familiar voice drawled.

"Nice to see you too, Gil." I accepted my sword from him, reacquainting myself with its weight. It still needed a name, but I didn't have a single idea. Maybe Gil would. "Hey," I started.

Between one breath and the next, Adam appeared, too, and a startled twitch went through me. The vampire squinted at the horizon, noting the cherubim. He was so pale that his skin looked chalky. His stubble was like

dark sand along his pronounced jawline. He wore a leather jacket, torn jeans, and thick boots. Somehow, though, it didn't seem strange that Adam also held a sword.

How had they all known?

"Remember what I taught you last time we saw each other?" Adam asked without looking away from the monsters.

He'd told me to utilize everything in the environment. I shifted my position and stood with the sun behind me, which would effectively blind my opponent in a fight.

A moment later, the first one landed right in front of me, sending a fingernails-down-chalkboard screech into the crisp air.

I didn't give it a chance to go on the offensive—I whirled and brought my sword arching for its neck, the sharp edge singing through the frost-filled air. The eagle's head lopped off like a knife through a cabbage. Blood sprayed, and I turned my attention to its other heads. Why were there so *many*?

The rest of the flock landed.

I could hear my companions fighting around me. True to form, Laurie was calling out taunts, sifting in and out of sight and cutting off a limb or a head every time he reappeared. Collith was sending bursts of lightning through a cherubim's multiple chests, one after the other. Bird. Lion. Man. Lyari was a blur of motion, swinging and swiping her sword with such swift grace that it looked like a strange dance.

Too late, I noticed the enormous wing coming at me. I parried an attack coming from the right, swinging my arm across my body, but this put me on the defensive. Sloppy.

"You're thinking too much," Adam barked, making me falter.

He was right—I was using memories instead of instinct, and it was slowing me down. Hours and hours we'd spent in that garage that smelled of oil and concrete, going through the same movements, the same exercises again and again. Until they'd become part of me, as much as any thoughtless gesture or absent action, like brushing hair out of my face or standing up.

I just had to trust myself enough to let go. Relinquish the fear and control and shame.

A bead of sweat ran down my temple. I raised my sword and, at the same time, delivered a hard kick to the creature's midsection. As it

staggered, I rushed forward and brought my blade down, instinctively bracing myself to absorb the impact of the blow.

It was exactly what Adam had been trying to teach me. Once I gave in to my body's impulses, I found a rhythm in them. It was easy after that. I lost myself to the battle, the singing sword in my hand, the great roar in my ears.

I wasn't sure when it started. But gradually, I became aware that with every slice, I was saying a name. Everyone that Belanor had harmed during his brief, terrible reign. "Laurie. Finn. Gil."

There came a point when there were no more enemies to cut down. Blood, cold and sticky, clung to my skin in streaks and splatters. I turned in a circle, still holding my sword at the ready. Almost daring another beast to come at me.

"Are you done?" someone called.

I looked up. Laurie was leaning against one of the trees, his arms crossed, his head tilted. Breathing hard, I glanced around me. Collith and Lyari were gone. Adam, who hadn't even broken a sweat, knelt in the snow and cleaned the blood and gore off his blade. Gil was poking one of the dead cherubim.

We were surrounded by body parts and corpses.

When I saw that, I wanted to kick myself. We couldn't leave them here, and I no longer had the resources of the Unseelie Court. Swallowing a sigh, I reluctantly turned to face Laurie. "I don't suppose you could work some of your magic here?"

His eyes gleamed. "We might be able to work something out."

His tone invoked flashes of firelit memories. My cheeks heated. I started to look around, wondering if the others had observed our interaction, but then I noticed the bodies again. My flare of desire faded.

Adam's voice rumbled into the stillness. "We're heading back to the shop. Want me to take the sword?"

I looked up, already knowing that Gil would be next to him. I started to nod and hand off the weapon he'd made me, but then I hesitated. My fingers curled around the hilt. "No," I said. "Actually, I think I'll hold onto it. Thanks, Adam."

He nodded and moved off, but Gil lingered. When our eyes met he said, "You have an… interesting fighting style. I can confidently say I've never seen someone using Taekwondo while swinging a medieval sword."

“It’s not medieval,” I said, holding the blade aloft. The gesture drew my attention to the black blood coating its silvery surface. “Adam made this for me.”

“He’s the one who taught you all that?” Gil glanced at one of the dead cherubim with raised brows.

“No, not all of it. My dad started training me when I was five years old.”

“Jesus,” he muttered. “No wonder you’re such a downer. What kind of man teaches his kid how to do that when they’re barely out of nappies?”

I felt my eyes narrow. “You were a Nightmare. You know why better than anyone,” I answered, my voice low with meaning.

There was a reason I’d thought Nightmares were on the verge of extinction—when we weren’t being taken and tortured by Belanor, we were hunted for our hearts.

Like a kill switch, the thought flipped something in my head and I was blinded by a flash of memory.

This was one event from the past that I hadn’t hidden in the wilds of my mind. Most of the day was still vivid, in fact, even if Dad’s face wasn’t.

We’d gone for a hike through Castlewood Canyon. Dad had found a spot in the sun, atop a flat rock. I could still remember the taste of peanut butter in my mouth as he started talking. He told me about the world we lived in. He warned me about the people who would take what they wanted, instead of asking for permission. He spoke of the greed that lived in their hearts.

The demon at the crossroads may have shattered my innocence, but there had already been a crack in it when the creature came out of the dark that night. Put there by my very own father.

I’d never hated him for it, though. Childhood was a luxury Nightmares couldn’t afford.

Most Nightmares, anyway. Judging from the expression on Gil’s face, he hadn’t experienced the same sort of upbringing.

Feeling defensive now, I braced myself for more questions about my father. But after a few seconds, Gil just pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and a lighter from the other. His movements were too fast, too unnatural to appear human. He’d have to keep working on that.

With a thoughtful frown, Gil tapped the end of the cigarette and sent embers toward the ground. He followed the direction of my gaze and misinterpreted why I was staring. He shrugged and said, “I figured now that I’m dead, it doesn’t really matter anymore, right?”

“Funny. Emma says something similar. ‘I’m on death’s doorway anyway, girl, let me be!’”

Gil grinned. “All right, well, I’d better head back—Horstman is showing me how to replace spark plugs. Cars aren’t my thing, mind you, but I thought it might be a handy skill set now that I have an eternity of breakdowns ahead of me. Thanks for the bloodbath, Sworn. Call me if you need anything.”

“Thanks. Back at you.”

The vampire hesitated, then knocked his shoulder against mine. A faint smile touched my lips as he turned away.

That smile quickly faded once he was gone, and my gaze drifted over the corpses littering the snow. A breeze murmured past, carrying Laurie’s scent on it. It was the only way I knew he was standing beside me.

“Guess this means Belanor really is awake,” I commented. “Not that the invitation left much room for doubt. I thought you said he wouldn’t attack until the night of the opera, though.”

“We were wrong,” he said simply. He turned away, raising his phone to his ear. Good to know that he had a cleanup crew on standby, I thought.

A crow called into the stillness. I searched a nearby treetop for it, but the branches were empty. They reached toward the dimming sky like a withered hand. As I stood there and stared, my arm began to ache from the weight of the sword.

Knowing there was no turning back once I obeyed my next impulse, I reached into my pocket and ran my fingertip along the edge of the invitation there. After another beat, I pulled it out and wordlessly held it out to Laurie, who was already done with his call. “Fine. I’ll go.”

I didn’t wait for his response. Instead, I returned my attention to the bloody mess surrounding us, picking my way over bodies and carnage. Belanor must’ve sent these things as an incentive. To piss me off. To warn me.

Next time he sent them—and there would be a next time, of that I was certain—someone I loved could be caught in the crosshairs. There was

only one way to stop the attacks. I'd seen his stable now, and Belanor had more than enough of the beasts to spare.

I was cold now. The pain of it settled into my bones. I forced myself to meet Laurie's gaze again. "I have an idea," I said. "A way to make it seem that Collith and I have reconciled, find out what Belanor's spell does, and get us close to him again. Close enough to gut, hopefully."

The faerie's eyes gleamed. "You have my attention."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

As agreed, I met the others just beyond the tree line.

In a single glance, it was obvious I'd interrupted something. Laurie was grinning, his eyes glittering as they always did when he'd succeeded in pissing someone off. Collith's posture was stiff. I wasn't sure whether to smirk or sigh. The sigh won—it was barely noon and I hadn't been awake long. My coffee hadn't kicked in yet.

There was something else that hadn't kicked in, too. I'd only realized it that morning as I stared into a pan of eggs, and an alarm went off inside me. I'd thought backward, trying to remember the last time I had gotten my period.

It was well over a month ago.

"Sorry I'm late," I said, then almost winced at my choice of words. To hide this, I raised my eyebrows at Laurie. "I got caught up in the fact that I really don't want to be here. You look horrible, by the way."

"I look fucking fantastic, and you know it," he countered, entirely unbothered. As the faerie tugged at the lapels of his black tuxedo, I watched him take in the frumpy sweater and ripped jeans I currently wore. He shook his pale head. "No. We need something with more cleavage."

"Not every situation calls for breasts, Laurie."

He winked. "All of the fun ones do."

I rolled my eyes as the corner of my mouth twitched, betraying me. I didn't let myself actually smile, though—I could feel Collith watching our exchange. Listening to every word. Ignoring him, I turned and showed Laurie my backpack. "There's a dress in here. I'll change when we get to Germany. You'll approve of what I chose, I promise."

Laurie gave me a look that said, *We shall see*. Rolling my eyes again, I shouldered my bag and we set off through the woods, our boots crunching over ice and snow.

The journey was a silent one. My faerie companions seemed to be lost in their own thoughts, and they walked slightly ahead of me. Not together, of course. But just as Collith had watched me and Laurie, I now found myself watching the two of them. Something had changed in the brief time they'd been staying at the safe house—maybe it was that Collith didn't radiate pure hatred, and Laurie wasn't saying something every five minutes to piss him off.

Or maybe I'd had the thought too soon. In the next moment, Laurie spoke under his breath, deliberately making it impossible for me to hear him

Whatever he said made Collith's fists clench. He mentioned checking the area for Guardians before sifting. I saw him far ahead, his head tilted to listen for voices or footsteps, and then Collith sifted again. This time, he went out of sight.

Laurie paused, waiting for me to catch up. We walked side by side now. Sunlight streamed through the naked treetops, and a crow's call echoed.

"I saw a memory in Collith's head the night we got him out of that cell," I said without preamble. Laurie's silver head turned in my direction. "It was right after you made that ridiculous marriage proposal in front of everyone. Collith tackled you and started beating the shit of you. 'There you are,' you said. You sounded so… triumphant. As if he'd played right into your hands. That's when I finally put it together. Your reason for causing that scene in the throne room, I mean. You were trying to draw Collith out."

I could feel Laurie looking at me, but I kept my eyes on the path ahead. After another moment the Seelie Prince said, his voice soft, "He was killing himself, Fortuna. A little more, every day. Getting Collith back to his Court, where he could see his throne, that's what brought him back."

"You're wrong. He didn't care about the throne." I stopped and faced him. I wasn't sure why it was so important to me that Laurie finally admitted the truth of his feelings for Collith, but it was. "I think there's a small part of him that still loves you. Maybe more than a small part. That's why he reacts so strongly every time so much as your name comes

up. That's why *you* kept tabs on him over the years, and spied on me when you didn't know what my motives were, and insisted on saving him from Viessa—you still love Collith, too."

Laurie's only reaction was a bland smile. "It's kind of you to attempt mending the bridge between us, Your Majesty, but sometimes it isn't only a matter of too much water under the bridge. Sometimes, the bridge has been washed away completely, and there's simply nothing left to repair."

"What's to stop you from rebuilding it, then?" I countered. I wasn't sure why I was arguing, or even advocating for Collith. It probably had something to do with his mother's last words, her voice weak and imploring. *Have faith in him.*

Unaware of the image in my head, Laurie raised his eyebrows. "Are you saying *you've* forgiven him?"

A bitter laugh caught in my throat. A moment later, I drew to a halt—we'd reached the dim entrance to the Unseelie Court. Apparently Viessa didn't station Guardians in these woods anymore. "Touché," I said.

Collith had yet to make an appearance, so Laurie and I waited just outside the tunnel. Icicles hung off the top of it, dripping in the sun. I lowered my gaze, following the progress of a drop that glittered like a glass bead as it fell. In doing so, I locked eyes with Laurie. A jolt went through me, and the expression on his face made it difficult to think.

He moved closer and bent his head. I felt his lips tickle my cheek as he said, the words hushed like a secret, "Come away with me tonight. After the opera."

I swallowed. I told myself to move away, but my body wouldn't obey. "You already know what I'm going to say."

Laurie's hand rose, and his fingertips skimmed the side of my neck. I almost leaned in to the touch before I remembered that Collith would be here any second. Laurie didn't seem to share my concern. "Tell me you haven't thought about it," he murmured. "Tell me you don't want me inside you."

I finally managed to step back and put myself out of Laurie's reach. "I think about a lot of things. Sure, I think about you every day, but I also think about death every day. It's funny how often the two thoughts coincide."

"All I heard is that you think about me every day."

Luckily, Collith found us before I could kill Laurie, or maybe kiss him again. With him, those lines always seemed to blur. “Apologies,” he said.

As if using a magic portal could help me escape my thoughts, I hurried into the tunnel and through the Door.

The faerie males were close behind. Seconds later, we emerged from a Door on the upstairs level of a house. It was obvious that it had been abandoned, or this place was intentionally kept vacant. There was no furniture, and the floors and walls were outdated. The wallpaper was like something I’d see in an Audrey Hepburn film.

“Let’s go,” Laurie muttered, hurrying out of the room. “This house gives me the creeps.”

Collith and I followed him, and I fought another smile. “*This* is what gives you the creeps?”

He just went down the stairs, tailcoats flying. We followed again. The floorboards creaked with every movement. Laurie had left the front door wide open, and I stepped onto a busy sidewalk, adjusting to the night sky when the one we’d left behind had been bright. Collith and Laurie moved into my line of sight, and seeing his tuxedo reminded me of the pressing time. Once again, the three of us started walking.

After we’d walked a bit, I nodded toward a coffee shop on a nearby corner. “I’ll change in there. Wait here.”

Laurie promptly followed me as I started toward the entrance. I resisted the urge to ram my elbow into his gut and reached for the doorknob instead. Laurie beat me to it, and after he opened the door, he dipped into an elegant bow. I couldn’t tell if it was mocking or sincere, but since he was Laurie, I went with the latter—I ground my heel into his boot when I passed, and I heard him utter a low curse. I was smiling as I approached the front counter. A single employee sat there, and he couldn’t have been older than fifteen or sixteen.

“Do you have a bathroom?” I asked cheerfully.

The boy didn’t look up from his phone. “Costs to use it,” he said.

Laurie casually dropped a twenty dollar bill onto the counter. “Will that be enough?”

That got the boy’s attention. Sitting upright, he slid the twenty out of sight and dropped a set of keys in front of me. I picked them up and gave the boy a polite nod. Then I shouldered past Laurie and muttered, “Show off.”

“My wealth is the only thing I can flaunt without being arrested for public indecency.”

I didn’t bother acknowledging this as I hurried down the hallway, found the women’s restroom on the left, unlocked it, and closed the door behind me. I changed quickly, and in less than a minute, I moved in front of the small mirror to see how I looked.

For tonight, I’d chosen a dress that was the color of an opened vein or still-beating hearts. The bodice was hard and tight, like a corset, and the cut at the top pushed my breasts up—that was the part I’d thought Laurie would like. The skirt was long and frothy, its bulk perfect for hiding the weapons strapped to my thighs. It made soft sounds with every step I took toward my backpack. A moment later, I straightened, and I held a necklace.

The sapphire Collith had given me caught the light. I looked at it, and in an instant, I knew I couldn’t do it. Not even for a night of pretending, and no matter how convenient it might be for our ruse.

I tucked the sapphire away and pulled out a blue box instead. There was a creaking sound as I lifted the lid, revealing the diamond necklace Laurie had given me for my birthday. After another moment of debate, I lifted the piece of jewelry from its bed and put it on. The box went back into my bag. As a final touch, I put on the black heels I’d brought. They certainly weren’t as comfortable as boots, but they looked a hell of a lot better with this dress.

My makeup was still holding up, so I fluffed my curled hair, pinched my cheeks, and left the bathroom to find the others. Laurie stood at the other end of the hall, staring out a paned window. He turned as I stepped into the open.

“Excellent choice,” he said with an approving nod. “We’ll just be sure to get that horrible backpack checked.”

I pasted a confused look on my face and clutched one of the straps. “What? No, I’d planned to wear this all night.”

Laurie frowned. “You’re joking. Please say you’re joking.”

“Guess you’ll find out.” I smirked, enjoying his dismay. As I turned toward the door, I saw Laurie’s gaze lingering on the diamonds resting against my skin. But then I caught sight of Collith, and the comment I’d been about to make about the necklace faded away.

“Now *there* is a king,” Laurie declared.

While I'd been changing, he had been doing the same, apparently. Collith fussed with his cuff links, and that stubborn lock of hair slipped free of the gel he'd put in. My fingers twitched, instinctively wanting to fix it. Not so long ago, I would've given in to the impulse.

There was an awkward pause, and I quickly looked away, loathing the pang of longing that went through me. I forced myself to replay the clip of Viessa's voice, something I'd been doing constantly since learning the truth. *Every time Collith has sex, he takes a piece of his partner*.

Completely unaware of where my mind had gone, Laurie looked at me sidelong and raised his eyebrows. "Fortuna, what do you think? Beautiful, is he not?"

"If you really want my opinion, I think you're an insufferable bastard," I told Collith with a sweet smile. Then, pretending to frown, I glanced back at Laurie. "Oh, wait, were you asking about the suit?"

"Do you know what would make this situation better?" he asked suddenly, flashing both of us a wide grin.

I sighed. "Don't say sex, please."

"It's definitely sex. Sex is always the answer."

Collith lifted his head, and I expected to see fury or hatred in his eyes. There usually was when he was in a room with Laurie. But his face revealed nothing as he said, "We should order a ride. Fortuna's shoes aren't made for walking ten blocks."

It hurt to agree with him on anything, so I didn't respond. Laurie held up his phone, drawing our attention to the screen. "Already done. Shall we?"

I nodded, and we left the warm little coffee shop. Outside, a black sedan idled by the curb. Laurie opened the door and turned back to me. Headlights rushed past, shining bright behind him. At that moment, Laurie didn't look real. He was too beautiful, too perfect.

"Are you ready, my exquisite queen?" he asked.

I didn't bother telling him that I wasn't a queen anymore. I stopped with one hand on the roof of the car. "Ready for what, exactly?"

Laurie gave me his very best grin, the one that screamed trouble and wicked things. "Why, to seize the day. Detain the evening. Torture the night," he said.

I picked my skirt up and got into the backseat, saying over my shoulder, "Let's just get this over with. No surprises, Laurie. We stick to

the plan."

Laurie got in and closed the door just as Collith started toward it. "Since when am *I* the wildcard in this story, Fortuna? Shall I review everything that's happened in the past few months?"

Collith sifted, appearing on my other side, and Laurie gave him a cheery finger wave. I swore I could hear Collith's teeth grinding together. I ignored both of them and looked out the window, watching the lights of Munich blur past. Despite the cold, the people of this city filled the sidewalks and gathered on corners. It was a place I would like to get to know, once I didn't have enemies coming out of the walls like cockroaches.

Then a building rose up, and all thoughts of cockroaches ended.

The opera house was like nothing I'd ever seen before.

The car dropped us off at the doors, and we ascended the shallow steps. At the top, Laurie moved to stand on my left side, and Collith appeared on my right. Neither of them said a word, but by some unspoken signal, both males offered their arms. I hesitated for a beat, then accepted, trying to ignore my wild heartbeat.

We entered the opera house together. The three of us.

The stares began immediately. A string quartet played deeper in the theater. To my surprise, the crowd was made up of numerous species. Standing amongst the fae I'd expected were humans, shapeshifters, and vampires. Glamour was everywhere I looked, a shimmer at the corner of my eye, a blurred edge or a glimpse of something beneath. I'd gotten so used to the fae at the Unseelie Court. Beneath the ground, faeries embraced their true selves. Every urge and impulse. Even if, in some cases, those impulses were monstrous.

We found a spot along the edge of the room, still visible to the gossips, but apart enough that Laurie was able to make comments on every courtier that walked past. "That female has more baggage than the luggage carousel at LAX. Oh, God, he's not a bombshell, that one is a fucking nuke. Keep your distance."

A collective murmur traveled through the room.

Belanor had arrived.

My body reacted as if disaster had struck, like an earthquake or a bomb. *Stay focused, Fortuna.* I exhaled and summoned the Unseelie Queen. Belanor had brought a date, I noted clinically. It wasn't Iris. This

stranger didn’t matter, though. My gaze moved past her, then past the faerie at her side. Belanor didn’t matter, either. At least not yet—his part would come later, toward the end of the evening.

The couple had only taken a few steps when I spotted the person most vital to our plan tonight. He entered behind Belanor, his lovely face set in an expression of neutrality. Laurie tilted his head close to mine and spoke under his breath. “And there is our prize.”

I put my back to Vulen, knowing we’d reached the point of the evening I had been dreading. Laurie gave me a parting wink and strolled off on his own, plucking a cherry off a woman’s drink as he passed. He popped it into his mouth and vanished into the crowd, following Vulen to carry out the next phase of Operation Kill Belanor.

I looked at Collith. Remembering the part we were supposed to play, I gave him a warm smile and slid my hand into the crook of his arm. “Shall we find our seats?”

Without missing a beat, he returned my smile. It was a blatant reminder that Collith had been King of the Unseelie Court for years—he knew far more than I did when it came to plots and pretending.

The two of us were gaining attention. Though it was impossible to recognize me by my face, as it was ever-changing for each person who looked upon it, Laurie had planted seeds before our arrival. Even now, certain faeries rushed between clusters of other courtiers, passing on the shocking piece of gossip. I heard my name.

Collith Sylvyre and Fortuna Sworn.

They came together.

Didn’t they break up?

Our plan was working, but I didn’t know how I felt about that. The opera began just as Collith and I found our box. We slipped through a makeshift door of thick curtains.

The balcony was more private than I thought it would be. The lighting was low, faded, making the red velvet on the walls and chairs look soft. Warm. An invitation. I perched on the edge of the chair, my spine as stiff as a steel rod. Collith held his tie into place as he lowered onto the chair next to me. That lock of hair broke free of its careful styling again, and he raked it back in an automatic gesture, his eyes fixed on the stage below us. There was a sconce directly to his left, and it cast a glow over him. Dust motes floated past like bits of diamonds.

Inexplicably, I chose that moment to think of what he'd told me about sirens. *The ones who are deaf to her sweet nothings are wholly and pathetically lost to another.*

Would he still be immune to her song now? What would I hear?

Why don't you focus on what you're hearing now? that inner voice said. I tried to concentrate on the singers below us. Minutes ticked by. I gradually became aware of a prickling sensation. My hands tightened in my lap. "You're staring at me," I observed.

"I'm waiting for you to tell me."

More singers entered the stage, adding their voices to the strange, lovely song. "Tell you what?"

Collith turned his face away and said, "Whatever it is that has you fidgeting like that."

I hadn't realized I was until the second he pointed it out. I clasped my hands together, staring hard at the figures on the stage. But all I could see, in that moment, was the baby from Mercy Wardwell's vision spell.

"I'm late," I whispered to Collith. He went still. I swallowed, turning my eyes back to the performance. "I didn't even notice until this morning. I've been a little distracted. Laurie and I… Laurie and I used protection, so if I am pregnant, the odds are that it's yours."

Still, Collith said nothing. He was probably remembering those nights we'd gotten careless. Doing the math. The silence between us went on like a dark song of its own.

I was about to speak again when Collith disregarded the opera completely, shifting his legs to the side of the chair. He put his elbows on his knees and met my gaze. "I don't care if it's mine. I'll help however you need me to, with or without a paternity test," he told me.

"Collith…" I said his name on a sigh. A sigh that said a thousand things I couldn't say with my tongue. Too much had happened in the brief time we'd known each other. It was the sort of strife that most people experienced over a lifetime, but ours had been shoved into a matter of weeks. Confused, wary, and dozens more feelings that filled my veins and sent my heart pounding, I shook my head. "Why didn't you just tell me the truth, Collith? You had every chance. I was right there. Every single day, I was right down the hall."

It was his turn to look away again. The stage lights tinted his skin and highlighted his tight jaw. "Because I'm a coward. All right? I'm a fucking

coward.”

Collith’s words sparked a memory, and I remembered what Lyari had once said about Collith. *His Majesty may have a noble soul, but he also has a heart full of fear*.

I saw it now. Collith was always so well-guarded, and the doors to his mind slammed shut. But there was fear in the way he rubbed his eyes and gave up waiting for my response. Fear in the way he couldn’t wait any longer for my response and spoke in a rush. “I realize this is an impossible concept to someone who fears nothing—” Collith started.

I cut him off with a sound that was supposed to be laughter, but it came out strange and sharp. “You think I don’t have fears? Is it because I’m such a monster, you assume I don’t feel every emotion as powerfully as you do?”

Collith’s nostrils flared, and I knew he sensed my fear. I kept forgetting that he possessed a Nightmare’s abilities now. “That’s it, isn’t it?” Collith said sharply. “That’s what you fear most. You really do think you’re a monster.”

“Because I am one, Collith. I *liked* it. What I did in that clearing. Not just the power, but the pain I was causing. The screams were… delicious.” I winced as I heard the word leave my mouth, and I lowered my eyes in a rush of shame.

Collith didn’t leave me hanging in suspense.

“I won’t deny that Nightmares have a predatory nature,” he said slowly. “Now that I have a taste of what it’s like to be one, I understand the temptation of using this power. It will always be part of what you are. But it’s not *who* you are, Fortuna, which is how I know you’ll never become what you fear.”

He sounded so certain. It was tempting to believe him. “And who am I?” I asked.

Collith looked into my eyes and said, “You’re the sort of person who would risk your life to save me from that dungeon, even though you loathe me.”

I don’t loathe you, I almost said. The words stuck in my throat.

Of its own volition, my focus dropped to Collith’s mouth, which was set in a tight line and slightly downturned, then my gaze snapped back to his. Everything between us brightened in a slow smolder of ice and fire. Images whispered through me, moments from the last evening we’d spent

together. I remembered every detail as clearly as the crystal chandelier above our heads. At the time, I'd thought it was one of the best nights of my life.

"Do you know how much it took for me to trust you?" My voice broke. "And how much pain it caused when I found out the truth?"

Collith sounded like he was on the verge of breaking, too. "I do know, because I feel the same pain."

"It's not the same. After what happened at the crossroads, I was so afraid, Collith. I thought I'd never be able to enjoy someone touching me again. So that first night… when you and I…" I swallowed. "Your lie tainted it. Now I'll think about the first time I had sex with someone and only be able to remember the manipulation. The power you took from me without my consent. All those years, I protected that piece of myself because I wanted it to be…"

"You wanted it to be a good memory," he said.

I nodded, my mouth trembling. "Just one good memory, after so many bad ones. I guess that was too much to ask for, though."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I took that from you."

I actually believed him. The truth would always remain that Collith didn't deserve my forgiveness. But I hadn't deserved Cyrus's forgiveness, either, and he had given it freely.

Collith and I stared at each other, and in spite of everything, in spite of the words that still floated between us, I felt it. That relentless, inexplicable heat that he always seemed to cause in me, as if his proximity stoked a bed of coals resting at the bottom of my stomach.

Kiss me, I thought.

After everything Collith had done, I was too proud to admit I wanted him. But if he kissed me, I could still pretend. I could deny my weakness and questionable choices.

Our hearts thudded once. Twice. Three times. Collith didn't move or speak.

It was impossible to decipher whether it was relief or immense disappointment that filled my heart. Hoping he hadn't seen anything in my eyes, I stood from the chair and moved toward the exit. "Well, everyone has seen us together, and Laurie is probably—"

With the speed of a creature that hadn't been born in this world, Collith grabbed my skirt and pulled me to him with such force that I

caught my balance on his chest. In the next breath, we were kissing, our mouths so hungry and frantic that it felt like we'd have no other nights but this one. We wouldn't, I told myself. We moved into the shadows, and my back pressed against a wall covered in drapery and padded velvet. Collith tasted like wine; he must've had a glass before meeting me tonight. I moaned into his mouth, the sound covered by the crescendo of a singer below.

Collith didn't bother removing my dress—he just lifted the voluminous skirts. Before I realized what he was doing, he pulled my panties to the side, got down on his knees, and ran the tip of his tongue through my folds. I almost let out a gasp that would've surely alarmed people in the boxes around us. My legs were already threatening to give out.

But I knew there wasn't enough time to reach that peak, and I wanted to remember what it felt like to have Collith inside me. I reached down and cupped his jaw, wordlessly tugging him upright. He got to his feet and I kissed him again. As we consumed each other, I used both hands to undo his belt.

Collith figured out what I wanted and helped me with the stubborn prong. Then he stopped and said, "I don't have a condom."

"I do. In my backpack."

He sifted before the words had fully left my mouth.

Collith was back in less than a minute. I hadn't moved. I watched, breathing hard, as he opened his pants and put his hand inside. The belt jangled, but I didn't care if anyone heard, especially when Collith's length sprang free. He was already hard and ready. He reached for my legs, probably to pick me up, but something stopped him. Collith searched my eyes. In a silent answer, I put my arms around his neck and drew him even deeper into the darkness.

A wrapper crinkled and I stood there, listening to the opera while Collith put the condom on. Then, acting as if we had time, he moved my skirts aside and dragged my underwear down, sensually kissing bits of bare skin as he went.

I was about to urge him on when Collith lifted me and held my legs against his hips. He positioned his erection at my opening, which clenched and unclenched with tingling anticipation. The second I felt the tip of his cock, I expected Collith to be rough and abrupt. Instead, he sank inside me

slowly. I stifled another groan, burying my fingers in his hair like I'd been wanting to all night. I kissed him again and flattened my chest against his.

Kissing me back, Collith eased himself out and back in, his movements fluid and sensual. Music filled my ears, the intensity building and climbing, just like the sensation inside my body. Collith reached between us and touched me at the perfect moment, his fingertips bringing me into the light with him.

Collith and I moaned into each other's hands, muffling our sounds instinctively, that this feeling was exactly what the figures on stage were currently singing about.

Then the glow faded, as it always did. We broke apart. Collith removed the condom and tossed it into a tiny waste basket nearby. The movement made me notice that some of his buttons had come undone during our activities.

"Why are you wearing that?" I asked quietly, gesturing at the chain around his neck.

As I waited for Collith to respond, I remembered what he'd told me the first time I saw this necklace. *Fae males have never worn something to represent their mates, which seemed strange to me. Why wouldn't we want to announce it to the world? Why shouldn't our partners have the same expectations our customs expect of them?*

"Mating bond or not, I meant the things I said during our wedding," Collith said, redoing his buttons.

So had I, but that didn't stop us from breaking every vow we'd made. Feeling more somber now, I ran a hand through my hair, then reached down with both to fluff my skirts. "Some wedding. There wasn't even cake," was all I said.

Collith's head tipped. He secured his belt while he responded to me. "I'd hoped to rectify that, actually. Renew our vows in front of the people you love. A ceremony that included cake, and dancing, and gifts. Maybe even a honeymoon."

"I would've really liked that." As much as I hated crowds, I had always imagined throwing a wedding of my own. Experiencing that normal, beautiful, messy passage of humanity and time. I smiled and added, "A fall ceremony, I think."

"With a lot of garden lights. Maybe strung over our heads, like a canopy."

Danger, danger, my heart blared. I'd been down this path with Collith before. Talking about the future with him. Daydreaming with him. If I wasn't careful, I would find myself right back in that dark place that awaited at the end. And next time, I might not be able to find a way out. "Laurie should be ready for us by now," I said abruptly.

Collith's gaze saddened, and when I saw that, I felt a prick of longing. Followed by a prick of confusion. Wanting Collith after everything seemed so impossible I wondered if this was another dream.

But it couldn't be a dream, because the next question he directed to me was so real, so stark that it caused physical pain. "Don't you love me, even a little?"

I looked up sharply, frowning. Was this another attempt to manipulate me? But the faerie's jaw was clenched, his eyes averted. It was obvious he hadn't meant to ask out loud.

I didn't answer right away, and his words floated in the space between us, refusing to dissipate. Collith didn't know, I realized. I had never said the words to him, despite how many times I'd thought them. Felt them. Now my love for him was just a whisper, a sound from some forgotten place where nothing could die.

"I wish I could," I lied.

Without waiting for his response, I lifted my skirts and turned away. After a moment, I heard the soft sounds of Collith's shoes against the carpet. He followed me past the curtains and into the hallway. I checked the time on my phone and instantly felt the pricks of anticipation and anxiety.

It was time for the next phase of our plan.

"Laurie should be ready for us," I said again. "He said they'd be in one of the offices."

Collith nodded to the left, his expression inscrutable again. "This way."

We walked past door after door. Minutes later, we ventured into a part of the opera house where every single light was turned out, and Collith led me into a room that was more of a study than an office. Books lined the walls and my footsteps were muted by a thick rug. There was still a faint scent of cologne in the air—whoever worked in this space had been here recently.

My eyes met Laurie's, who leaned against the shelves, arms crossed, and then I turned.

Sitting in the middle of the room, Vulen was secured to a desk chair with the holy rope I'd brought in my backpack. The rope Laurie had fetched as soon as he followed Vulen to their box and knew where to find him. After that, Laurie assured me it would be a simple matter luring the other male to a secluded spot. Some place we could conduct our investigation without being disturbed. Before we killed Belanor, and his followers scattered to the wind, I wanted to know the truth about his goddamn spell.

I went over to Vulen with a huge smile, spinning him around to face me. He tried to control his reaction to my arrival, but the faerie was already thinking of the day he'd helped Belanor torture me. His terror filled the room.

"Damn it," Vulen said in a burst. He'd probably seen my nostrils flare.

"Oh, no, fear is a good thing," I whispered, bending closer. I ran the edge of my finger along his jaw, noticing the ligature marks across his throat again. "That just means you're paying attention."

Vulen felt the trickle of my power. He couldn't hold back a whimper, and this made him angry, too. "What do you *want*?" he spat, jerking forward. The ropes held.

"Just tell me what you know about Belanor's spell, and I'll let you live," I crooned. "Simple at that."

But he shook his head. The taste of his terror filled my mouth, and I almost gagged with revulsion. Eggs. Rotten eggs. That's what it made me think of.

Vulen had been inside thousands of minds. As a result, his own had been overwhelmed, and he couldn't even protect himself against me. He couldn't protect himself against *anyone*, in fact. I felt no pity for him, though, because Vulen liked his helplessness. Even those ligature marks had been a choice, I discovered. The faerie had gotten them during a long, bloody night he'd been a married couple's plaything, and things had gone a bit too far.

There were so many other memories that rummaging through it made me think of a landfill. There was so much clutter that it would take me days to look at everything. No wonder Vulen hadn't been able to stand up to Belanor—he barely had enough thoughts of his own to make basic decisions, much less one that required bravery or risk.

He’d also seen inside Laurie, I realized a moment later, my fingers tightening on the faerie’s temples. He’d had access to my friend’s mysterious past. There was so much I hadn’t gotten to see during my brief time beyond that impenetrable wall.

I reminded myself that I wasn’t digging through Vulen’s mind to find out more about Laurie. I was doing it to find out more about Belanor.

Extracting myself from a memory of Laurie and Collith—with more reluctance than I wanted to admit—I kept going through Vulen’s chaotic mind. When I stumbled across an image of Belanor’s face, I halted again. Focused on it like someone looking through a microscope.

Sulfur. Darkness. Power.

This memory was one of the few that Vulen had been able to obtain from his liege; Belanor was just as good as Laurie at guarding his mind. It was the same memory I’d seen during my time within the Seelie Prince’s head. A sunlit hallway. Echoes of laughter.

I was about to move on when I realized the memory hadn’t ended with the witch’s branding. She’d performed what Belanor would later learn was a possession spell. I watched the young prince’s back arch as something happened inside of him. He’d blacked out from the pain, and when he woke up, the witch was gone and no one had even noticed his absence.

In the days following the strange encounter, Belanor kept his new scar hidden, though he didn’t know why. Not until he heard a voice in his head and realized he was no longer alone.

When I realized the truth, my first instinct was to recoil, to tear out of Vulen’s psyche so fast it was likely to cause damage.

Belanor had a demon inside of him.

I’d always known demonic possession was possible, of course. Our parents wanted me and Damon to be prepared for the many, many dangers of the world we lived in. But they’d made it seem like an extremely rare occurrence, almost unlikely. It required the sort of magic that few people were willing to do.

Which fit Belanor to a T.

My mind flashed back to those strange moments it had seemed like he was talking to himself—I’d thought he was unstable. It was still an accurate description for him, but now I knew that Belanor had also been communicating with someone.

He had a master. A voice on the other end of those conversations. The spell wasn't important to Belanor, it was important to the one who had started all this by sending a witch to the palace to bespell a young prince.

Demons answered to anyone with enough power, which meant the possibilities were endless. Whoever was controlling the cherubim, the demons, and Belanor could be anywhere.

I needed a name.

Desperation made me sloppy. I resumed my search, combing through the wreckage. I was so distracted I didn't sense Vulen coming, and he almost knocked me out of his head. Gasping, I recovered and struggled to regain my hold. The faerie fought me with an unexpected surge of strength.

Despite this, our battle didn't last long—between one moment and the next, Vulen's resistance fell away. It was so sudden that I couldn't check the momentum I'd built with my magic.

Something… broke.

My eyes snapped open, and I found myself staring into Vulen's. His were so wide the whites in them smothered his irises. Before I could say anything he breathed, "Finally."

I pulled back more, frowning. The sight of Vulen made my stomach drop. He sagged in the chair now, and his eyes were bleeding, just as Collith's had when I'd killed him. But Vulen saw my horror and mustered a tiny smile. There was satisfaction in the faint curve of his lips.

"You wanted me to do this," I whispered.

Vulen's smile faded. Flecks of blood accompanied every word as he said, "I live inside the minds of the most corrupt creatures that walk this earth, my lady. It is like a radio that never turns off. If I were to leave the Seelie Court, and seek the quiet of solitude… well, I'm sure you know what happens to a faerie banished to the mortal world. Do you know what the old ones see in their dreams most? They don't relive the Battle of Red Pearls or remember falling through dimensions. They see the gates. The closed gates. They will never open for us again. We can never go home."

I'd never heard such depths of despair in someone's voice. The way Vulen said those last four words was almost childlike in its smallness. But there was also something endless and hollow in him that made goosebumps rise along my arms. I knew, for as long as I lived, I would

hear Vulen's voice in my nightmares as he whispered, *We can never go home.*

Healer. We had to find a healer. I spun toward Laurie. "Is Maria here?" I asked desperately.

He shook his head, expressionless.

"I saw Seth in your mind," Vulen whispered, bringing my attention back to him. His skin was so pale now that it looked like chalk. "Help him. He needs… he needs…"

I put my ear next to his mouth, worried I'd miss the rest. But Vulen's voice faded, and whatever tension had been left in his body drained away, along with his life. He was dead.

Faeries were supposed to be immortal, and I'd just killed one with nothing more than the power running through my veins.

Finally ending the tense silence, Laurie cleared his throat. "Well. That didn't end the way I expected, but at least nobody important died."

I turned away from Vulen's body. "Your brother is possessed by a demon," I said dully. "The rest of the plan is off. We'll have to go to plan B again. Do you want to contact her or should I?"

Silence met my news. Then, once he'd had a chance to process it, I was distantly aware of Laurie uttering a low oath. "She's going to love that. How long?" he added.

He hadn't moved, so I turned and raised my gaze to his. My brow lowered as I registered his question. "How long has Belanor been possessed? I'm not sure how old you two were at the time, since the fae age so differently than other species. But if you were human, I'd say you looked six or seven."

"So my brother… my brother has been stuck in his own body for decades. Forced to watch and hear everything."

Laurie's face was neutral, but the slow way he said this revelation made me ache. I put my hands on his folded arms. His gaze dropped, noting the touch. "I was never taught about how possession works, Laurie," I said softly. "So I can't tell you if the victim is aware of what's happening. There's nothing we can do about it tonight. You should send that text."

He stood very still, saying nothing, but he knew as well as I did that a blade dipped in holy water wouldn't be enough to send Belanor's demon

back to Hell. Mom had mentioned once, during a lesson on Fallenkind, that it was nearly impossible to eradicate a demon from its host.

I couldn't bear to be in this room any longer. Yanking at my skirts, I whirled away from Vulen's body and went to the door. My expression was wiped clean because I knew Collith would be in the hallway, creating illusions for anyone who came near the room we'd occupied.

Sifting to beat me there, Laurie reached for the door handle, but he didn't open it. He probably wouldn't until I said something. *Fine*. "I blame you for this," I informed him.

Laurie quirked an eyebrow. "Pardon me, but I don't remember telling you to turn his brains into oatmeal."

I raised my eyebrows right back. "I didn't say it was your fault, I said I was blaming you."

"Oh, I see. Very mature, my queen."

This time, I did say it. "I'm not a queen anymore."

I couldn't hide the shame burning me up inside, simmering in my body like lava. Laurie looked at me for a moment, and there was a tender note in his voice as he replied, "Fortunately, a crown doesn't make a queen, Fortuna Sworn."

While I was in the hospital, Lyari had said almost exactly the same thing. Hearing it from Laurie brought a rush of different feelings. Feelings I didn't want to acknowledge when there was a body a few feet away from us. "Enough with the games," I said, keeping my voice low. "Why did you help us tonight? Don't try to say it was for my and Collith's sake. I saw your face when we walked into the opera house—you have a plan."

Laurie examined his nails. "While you were so busy pretending you still hate Collith tonight, did you tear yourself away from him long enough to notice how many courtiers spoke to me? That was just in the time I had in between leaving your side and acting as an accomplice to murder. It seems Fortuna Sworn is known as a powerful ally in our world. Everyone is quite impressed that I've attended yet another event with the last Nightmare on my arm."

"You want to be king again." I said the words flatly. "But the sacrifice you made—"

"The spell required that I give something up to get inside the tomb. It didn't require that I don't try to get it back at some point." Laurie's jaw worked, and there it was again, a glimpse of something beneath the

twinkling mask he always wore. A darkness that matched my own. A hunger. His eyes burned into mine as he added, “I *am* going to be king again, Fortuna. You may think me entirely smokescreens and games, but I am good at leading my people. It’s my purpose.”

I didn’t know why I was surprised. I thought back to the story he’d told the night we spent at the Seelie Court. *He was the firstborn son of a great ruler, which meant that he always knew what his future looked like. He spent all his days striving to become worthy of it.*

Where does that leave me? The question popped into my head, and I barely stopped myself in time from saying it out loud. It felt like someone had shoved a thorn through my heart. I frowned, wondering why Laurie’s plan hurt me so much. It wasn’t as if we had any sort of future together. It would be a relationship doomed before it even began.

Our incompatibility had nothing to do with what we were, but rather, *who* we were. The lives we wanted. Things that neither of us should have to give up. If Laurie became king again, it would effectively end whatever was between us—I didn’t want to be Queen of the Seelie Court, or even part of it. I wanted a life of the beautiful ordinary and the blissful mundane.

This was one secret Laurie wouldn’t ever discover, I decided. If he knew I had real feelings for him, or that I’d considered the possibility of us, he might do something stupid. Like try to fight for me.

“Has it ever occurred to you that it’s possible to have more than one purpose?” I asked instead, keeping my face void of all feeling. “Have you even tried finding another one?”

Laurie didn’t need to think about it; I could see the answer in his eyes, a hardness that only people with a fierce belief in something had. The sort of belief that superseded all else, even love. Part of me hoped Laurie would admit it and drive the wedge between us even further.

But he’d apparently reached his limit for truth-telling.

“Now is not the time for this conversation.” Laurie finally opened the door. “We should go. At least we accomplished one thing tonight.”

Collith heard the tail end of his sentence. “What did you accomplish?”

I moved into the hall as Laurie answered, “No one can doubt that you two have reconciled. Hopefully this provides an additional layer of protection once you return home.”

I glanced at him sharply. Though Laurie wasn't looking at me, his smirk told me everything I needed to know—he'd figured out what I'd done with Collith earlier tonight. He could probably smell it. The thought made me cringe. *Faeries*.

"Plan B is officially in motion. Up to the roof we go." Oblivious to my mortification, Laurie put his phone away. He gave me a long-suffering look. "Before you ask about your horrible backpack, I'll make sure someone picks it up. Sorcha, perhaps."

Collith fell into step beside him, and the two of them walked in front of me, shielding all of us from view. Laurie seemed to know exactly where we were going. He kept us away from the crowds… and Belanor.

"You saw Sorcha tonight?" I asked quietly, thinking about the glimpse I'd caught of Laurie and Sorcha. Thinking about anything besides what had just happened with Vulen.

Laurie glanced at Collith as if he were considering whether or not to trust him. After a few seconds he said, "I've appointed her as my new Whisperer, once I retake the throne."

"Whisperer?" I echoed.

"A spymaster, essentially. You have to agree that she'd be well-suited for the task."

A little too well-suited, I wanted to say. But then we were turning down a darkened hallway, and Laurie turned on his heel to face Collith. "See you back at the house," he said.

Collith nodded, but he didn't vanish. His eyes flicked toward me. I knew we were both thinking of what we'd done in that shadow-filled opera box. What could he say, though? Eventually Collith did sift, leaving a strange stillness in his wake. Then I hurried after Laurie, who had broken a doorknob and headed up a flight of stairs.

We went up, and up, and up. It took several minutes to reach a door at the top of the world, and Laurie broke that one, too. Wood splintered as he stepped into the cold. The rooftop was empty, I saw with relief. I kept expecting to look up and see Belanor in our path. But he was downstairs, still listening to the pretty music, utterly certain that I would be in his grasp by the night's end.

"Right on schedule," Laurie said. His head was turned to the left. I followed his gaze and went still.

There was the unmistakable outline of a dragon against the full moon, wings spread.

It was Tabitha in her second form, of course. She was our ticket off this rooftop and back to the Door. We hadn't killed Belanor, so the opera house was surrounded by his guards. Tabitha would simply carry us right over their heads.

As she flew toward the opera house, Laurie moved to the edge of the rooftop, probably to flag her down. I hung back, still awed at the sight of a dragon soaring over a night-drenched city.

Within seconds of Laurie walking away, Collith appeared at the edge of my vision. I was surprised he'd come back—that hadn't been part of the plan. Collith could sift. We'd implemented a plan B on the chance we failed to kill Belanor and I'd need a way out of the opera house. The sewers were no longer an option, thanks to my unpleasant encounter with the Rat King, and Laurie's inner circle were still in hiding. Tabitha had been the only way.

"What about you?" I asked abruptly, knowing we only had a few seconds left. Collith hadn't said anything, and the silence was too loud between us.

He turned his head. "What about me?"

"Will you follow in Laurie's footsteps? Are you plotting to get your throne back?"

"I don't know," Collith said. The swiftness of his response made me frown. Collith smiled, but there was no humor in his eyes or the curve of his mouth. "I've surprised you."

Hating that he could read me so easily, I shrugged and said, "I thought the Unseelie Court was everything to you."

"Not everything." Collith paused. "Not anymore."

Before I could respond, his gaze rose toward the horizon. I turned just as Tabitha landed on the rooftop, her talons curling around the low wall. Laurie heaved a sigh and sifted, reappearing on her back.

"She's been wanting to do something like this for years," he informed us. Then, under his breath, the words so quiet I doubted Laurie meant us to hear them, "My mother is going to *kill* me."

Without warning, he reached down and lifted me like I was one of the wispy clouds above us. I clutched his waist, unnerved at the sheer size of the creature beneath us. My skirt had ridden up, exposing one of my legs,

but I didn’t care. As Tabitha’s muscles bunched and her wings snapped open, I looked toward the place where Collith had been standing. He was still there, his hands tucked in the pockets of his tuxedo pants. Strands of his thick hair stirred in a cold gust of wind.

Then Tabitha launched off the roof. Collith fell away.

And I swam amongst the stars.

Soaring over Munich on the back of a dragon was an experience I’d never forget.

Still holding onto Laurie’s waist, I leaned over Tabitha as far as I dared, peering at the network of lights below. She didn’t take us far—only a few neighborhoods, really, but I committed every moment to memory. Secretly I hoped I’d get some pictures of them, too. Even if they were likely to be fuzzy.

Tomorrow morning, human tabloids would be full of articles and headlines about the dragon hoax. They’d already been tipped off by a source that was highly respected, according to Laurie. It was the only solution we could think of if plan B had become reality.

Worth the risk, I thought.

All-too soon, Tabitha slowed and hovered over the house we’d first arrived in. She couldn’t land, I realized, peering down again. She was just too big.

So the dragon lowered her massive body toward the roof, her claws leaving marks on the shingles. The whole structure was slanted, making it impossible to linger and thank my rescuer. I jumped down, clinging to a drainpipe, and hauled myself gracelessly through a window. Tabitha thrust herself back toward the sky, and once she’d disappeared from sight, I went in search of Laurie.

He had already sifted inside, of course. We faced each other outside the Door, and I gave him a weary smile. “No need to walk back with me. Finn is waiting on the other side.”

“Stay with me tonight,” Laurie said. His voice was thick, laced with sex and promise. It made heat curl in my stomach, and just like that, I was feeling awake again.

Then I remembered the comment he'd made earlier. *No one can doubt that you two have reconciled.* I'd just had sex with Collith in an opera box—I still smelled like him. Jumping into bed with Laurie immediately afterward didn't feel right, regardless of where I stood with each of them.

Unsure what to say, I hesitated. The invitation floated in the air between us. "Laurie, I…"

He saw the denial in my eyes and smiled. "Don't worry. I may be a fool, but I'm not a blind fool. I knew we had a long road ahead of us."

"How could you possibly know something like that? Do you have a time-traveling faerie in your basement, too?" I asked. It was meant to come out in a joking way, but my voice betrayed me by wavering. Suddenly I wanted to tell Laurie the truth.

"No. It's just obvious to anyone who cares to see it that you're in love with Collith Sylvyre."

I didn't respond, mostly because I was tired, but also because it was far more complicated than that. Especially after the painful realization I'd had tonight. It felt like that thorn in my heart slid deeper as I forced myself to say, "Good night, Laurie."

He winked. "See you in your dreams."

I didn't respond. The truth was, I wouldn't be seeing Laurie in my dreams, because someone else was already waiting for me there.

Then Laurie sifted, off to perform his tricks and schemes in some other part of the world. Hugging myself, I turned toward the Door. Something collided against my arm—there was an object in my fingers that hadn't been there before.

Looking down, I somehow wasn't surprised to discover I held a black rose.

CHAPTER THIRTY

They'd all waited up for me.

When I stepped into the loft, it was bright and busy. The counters were covered in fresh cookies. Gil closed the door to the oven, wearing one of Emma's flowered aprons, and there was a streak of flour on his chin. Emma herself stirred a bowl of cookie dough, a cocktail resting on the island in front of her. Finn stood on the old woman's other side, in his wolf form, watching her spoon with bright-eyed interest. Hello batted at the werewolf's tail, which flicked back and forth against the floor. Lyari even sat on the couch, flipping through one of Emma's Cosmopolitan magazines with a baffled look on her face. I hid a smile and hung my coat.

A second later, I turned from the hooks on the wall and discovered everyone staring at me.

"Well?" Lyari demanded finally, looking annoyed. "What happened?"

I held up one finger and walked backward, heading for my room. "Hold on."

Their voices floated through the open doorway as I changed out of my heavy gown, switching chiffon for sweatpants. I did a breathing exercise and then rejoined everyone in the living room.

With the fireplace emitting light and heat, a massive wolf curled up in front of it, and people gathered all around, the scene felt like a postcard.

I ate seven cookies and told my family about how the opera had gone. In a word, disastrous.

The others must've sensed that I didn't want to be alone, because they stayed up for hours after that. Talking, drinking wine, laughing. But eventually each one of them succumbed. Finn fell asleep in front of the

dying fire. Emma went to bed next, then Gil left, Lyari sifted back to wherever she was staying, and Damon was the last.

Yawning, my brother squeezed my arm and stood. “Good night, Tuna Fish.”

“Good night,” I murmured back, watching him lumber blearily toward his room, where Matthew had been sleeping all this time. I lingered on the couch, reluctant to do the same. I didn’t want to find any more memories. Didn’t want to face Oliver and all the unanswered questions he represented. I was also trying to avoid thinking about the fact that my period was still late.

Hello landed on my lap, cutting the thought short, and I stroked her back absently. *Maybe I should watch a movie,* I thought. Then something shifted in the corner of my eye. I looked over without thinking about it, expecting to see a shadow. I almost leaped up from the couch when my eyes met someone else’s.

“Nym,” I breathed, holding a hand against my chest. “You scared me.”

“Someone wants to speak with you,” the faerie said, sounding way too calm about it.

I stood slowly, darting a look around the loft. Hello sprinted into the laundry room, complaining the entire way. “Who, Nym? Who wants to speak with me?”

He gestured toward the window at the end of the hall. “They wait beneath the tree.”

Someone was outside? Wondering if I should summon backup, I hurried over to the glass and peered down. A Guardian of the Unseelie Court stood beneath one of the big trees near the driveway. I recognized him. *Omar*. The tension didn’t leave my body, though—I had no idea why Viessa would send one of her Guardians. “Stay here,” I commanded Nym.

He watched me silently as I hurried to the door, grabbed my coat, and disappeared into the dark stairwell.

“What do you want?” I called without preamble, stepping into the open. This faerie hadn’t done anything to warrant hostility, I knew, but I didn’t like that he was here. I pulled my coat on and closed the distance between me and Omar.

“Queen Viessa has requested your presence,” he said, his breath swirling through the air.

Moving into the darkness cast by the tree, I frowned. The queen and I hadn't spoken since Laurie, Gil, and I had broken Collith out of his cell. Was this a trap? Did she want retribution for humiliating her? "Why? Is something going on at Court?" I asked sharply.

Omar shook his head. "No. She's at her family's club in Ibiza."

"Ibiza?" I echoed, incredulous. "Look, it's late, and I'm not really in the mood to—"

The Guardian held out a cell phone, and his hand trembled, though he tried to hide it. Taking pity on him, I plucked the phone out of Omar's gloved palm.

The instant I pressed it to my ear, Viessa's voice blared through the tiny speaker. "Before you tell my poor Guardian to get lost, you should know that I told him if he couldn't convince you to come, his life is forfeit," she said.

I darted a glance at Omar, knowing he'd heard every word. "You better be kidding, Your Majesty. I honestly can't tell."

"Get your ass to Ibiza or you'll find out. You may use the Door at the Unseelie Court—not that lacking my permission stopped you before. Tell Laurelis that he's not as sneaky as he thinks he is."

She stopped, giving me a chance to respond. There was music in the background, loud, pulsating, and suddenly I wished I was there. Anywhere but here. In that world, it was easy to forget. I jabbed my toe into the snow, as if I could crush the strange urge rising within me. The urge to take Viessa up on her offer.

"So are you coming?" she asked, as if she could sense weakness on my end of the line. There was a male voice in the background, and she laughed at whatever he said. A shuffling sound filled my ear. Then Viessa added, "You said we could still be friends, Lady Sworn. Was that a lie?"

Her attempt to guilt trip me didn't work. I lifted my head, another *no* forming. But the word slowed when one of the barn windows caught my notice. Something had recently shattered it, so now my face appeared as disorientating fragments. I never really looked at myself; I didn't want to, even now. But there was something comforting in the broken pieces, the way I could only see a glimpse of one eye, the corner of my mouth. As if I weren't completely there, and the unseen parts were somewhere else. Could be anywhere.

Going to Ibiza would also be an excellent distraction from that niggling question at the back of my head. The one that had been tormenting me since the opera.

I just needed to bite the bullet and take a pregnancy test.

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," I told Viessa. She hung up, and I handed the phone back to Omar. "Did she send you to escort me?"

"Yes, Queen—" The Guardian caught himself. I watched the question flit across his face. What was it safe to call me, now that I was no longer his sovereign? "Yes, she did."

"I need a few minutes to get ready. You can come inside, if you want," I added, already wondering if I was making a huge mistake.

The possibility didn't stop me from going upstairs. Omar opted to remain outside, so I entered the loft alone. Nym was back in his room, the door closed. Respecting the signal we'd established, I went into my room without trying to speak with him.

Finn was so exhausted from changing forms that he didn't stir.

I stopped in front of my closet, considering the pathetic array of choices. After a minute, I reached for a hanger tucked into the back. A black dress hung from it. Made from stretch satin, the bodycon fit left little to the imagination. It was also cinched at the waist, and the asymmetric cut in the skirt highlighted my legs. The last time I wore this, I'd gone to a bar with Sorcha, showing the fake IDs she procured using her Unseelie connections. It was strange that I was putting it back on, years later, to go out with another treacherous faerie. More questions hounded me. Was history about to repeat itself? Was I being foolishly optimistic giving Viessa the benefit of the doubt?

Then the other question came back. One that had nothing to do with Viessa, and everything to do with me and my future. *Still no period.*

Trying to evade it yet again, I put the dress on, applied a hasty layer of makeup, and rejoined Omar outside. We trekked to the Unseelie Court in silence, no easy feat when I'd decided to wear heels and forego a coat. Once we reached the Door, Omar gave me the name of the club Viessa was at, and we walked through.

He led me down a cobblestone street, the buildings on either side bathed in moonlight. Clusters of figures walked up and down the sidewalks, dressed in everything from shabby jeans to dresses that glittered. Wearing a glamour to hide his pointed ears and strange-looking

armor, Omar rushed past everything, making the city difficult to take in, but I tried, anyway.

We halted outside a building lit up with neon signs. A line of people waited along its length, standing behind a velvet rope. Omar put his face next to the bouncer's and said something, the words low and brief. The human instantly reached for the rope, lifted it, and stepped aside, staring straight ahead as we passed. We made our way down a narrow hallway, pulsing with red light and distant sounds. The walls were covered in velvet curtains, making the air feel hot and tight.

Then we reached the end, and the ceiling fell away, putting me and Omar at the edge of an enormous space that was a circus and a house party all at once. Noise crashed over us. A DJ bobbed and swayed on the other side of the club, his silhouette standing out starkly against a huge, vibrant screen.

Omar led me past numerous alcoves and a massive crowd of partiers. I spotted the Unseelie Queen the instant she came into view—Viessa sat in the VIP section, of course. A dozen figures surrounded her in a lush booth, all of them beautiful and heavy-lidded from whatever drugs they'd done. The table in front of them was littered with upturned glasses, puddles of spilled cocktails, and plates of half-eaten food.

Standing, Viessa welcomed me with open arms and an exaggerated smile. "Fortuna, darling, it's wonderful to see you! *Love* the dress. Come, sit, sit. Jolynn, move your fucking ass. My friend is here."

She was wasted, I thought as I slid awkwardly around the table. Viessa's companions were equally gone, and once they'd resettled on the cushions like a flock of seagulls, most of them lost interest in me—a strange experience for a Nightmare. I liked Ibiza already.

Omar planted himself near the booth, resting his hand on his sword. I searched for Nuvian, but there was no sign of him. Interesting.

"A toast. To new friendships," Viessa declared, holding a shot out to me, a second one in her other hand. Her long earrings quivered against the sides of her neck, and she looked stunning in a lacy green dress that stopped just short of her unmentionables. None of her friends reacted to the toast, and it felt as if we were alone, somehow.

I took the glass and quirked a brow. "You go first."

The queen put a black-tinged hand on her chest. I couldn't help but admire her for not wearing a glamour, and I wondered if the humans here

assumed her icy appearance was a costume. Oblivious to my thoughts, Viessa sounded wounded as she asked, “Don’t you trust me, Nightmare?”

“Not even a little.”

She laughed and brandished her shot, then tossed it back. Viessa slammed the glass down, declaring, “You remind me of myself, Fortuna Sworn. Maybe that’s why I like you so much.”

“I’m not sure that was a compliment,” I remarked dryly. Viessa just tipped her head back again, downing another shot. She didn’t even notice how I avoided taking mine. Swallowing, Viessa ushered her friends to leave their seats again. Then she was gone, tossing a string of words over her shoulder that I couldn’t make out. The smile she flashed me was wild and free, and in that instant, she looked like an entirely different person.

I watched the queen meld into the crowd, and I realized this was the creature Collith had probably fallen in love with. The creature that had crooned, cajoled, threatened, and bargained her way to the throne. Strangely enough, I couldn’t blame my ex for loving her, however psychotic she’d turned out to be.

Viessa came back, pouting. “You’re not dancing with me!”

I hesitated, looking toward the crowd with an uncertain frown. “I guess I’m not in the dancing mood,” I said after a long pause.

“If I fetch you a pregnancy test, right now, will you dance with me afterwards?” the queen asked bluntly.

Hearing my secret come from someone else’s lips felt like a slap. I gaped at her, struck speechless for once. There didn’t seem any point in lying, so when I recovered, I didn’t try. “How did you know?” I said.

Viessa arched a brow. “You didn’t really think I’d miss the shot, did you? You’re a terrible liar, dear.”

She didn’t say anything else, and I realized the queen was waiting for a response to her offer. My stomach churned. It was just fear, I knew that, but I couldn’t ignore the tiny voice wondering if my upset stomach was something more. Collith and I hadn’t exactly been careful during our… recent encounters. A baby was all-too possible.

“I don’t know if I’m ready to take a test,” I confessed, trying to keep my voice down. I didn’t want the entire Seelie Court getting wind of this.

“Have I discovered what the great Fortuna Sworn is afraid of?” Viessa asked, dramatically widening her eyes. “The Slayer of the Undead cowers from the truth?”

I wasn’t amused. “I don’t know how that one caught on. All I did was burn my fucking house down with some zombies inside it,” I muttered.

“Sometimes the facts don’t matter,” Viessa countered. “Why else would stories still hold so much power?”

“Are all faeries such chatty drunks?”

She raised her frost-tipped eyebrows at me. “Face your fear, Nightmare. You’re no coward.”

As annoying as I found her just then, the queen was right. I needed to stop running, not just from this, but all the things I was afraid of. “Where are we supposed to get a test at this time of night?” I asked, resigned.

Everything happened quickly after that. Viessa got some tests from her friend, who apparently carried them around in her purse, and the queen marched us into a bathroom. She didn’t turn her back as I did my part, and I bit back a biting remark that could get me in trouble. Afterward, I set the test on the edge of the sink, and we prepared to wait. Viessa didn’t fill the silence; she was peering at her phone with narrowed eyes.

Then my results appeared on the grainy screen.

“It’s negative,” I said, frowning. I stared down at the tiny line, struggling to believe it. I’d been so certain…

“Do another one. I don’t want you to have any doubts,” Viessa instructed.

I didn’t argue. Driven by a tide of feeling I couldn’t define, I reached for the second pregnancy test, and we did it all again. Another straight line appeared. Negative. Seeing it, Viessa strode to the door, her heels clipping against the tiles.

“Now for your end of the bargain,” she said, pushing it open. Light and sound poured into the room. The faerie stood there, waiting with an expectant look.

Letting out a sad breath, I tossed the tests into the trash and followed her through the crowd.

Music made the air vibrate and pound. At first, I was unenthusiastic, distracted. Viessa was charming, though, and she knew how to set others at ease. Soon enough, she’d convinced me to move my arms and sway. The room was so hot that sweat slid down the skin between my breasts. Someone brushed against me, and I instinctively edged away, unable to hide my cringe. Viessa didn’t miss a thing. She moved closer and put her lips next to my ear, her body still moving in time to the beat. “There’s no

shame in what you are, Nightmare," she said. "Would you tell a lion not to hunt, or a wolf not to howl?"

She stepped back, her expression knowing, and I rolled my eyes. A broad-shouldered human pressed against her back, daring to skim her sides with his hands. I waited for Viessa to turn him into an ice sculpture, but she merely turned and pressed into the male, rolling her groin against his. His teeth glowed in the neon lights as he grinned.

The next time someone's skin touched mine, I forced myself not to recoil. Instead, I danced closer, allowing it to happen again. The human was a delicate-boned girl with so many freckles on her face they resembled stars in the sky. A flavor coated my tongue, distinct and floral —lavender. There were her everyday fears, the manageable phobias most people had. Dogs, deep water, needles. Then, beneath these, a well of terror beckoned to me. I peered into the darkness and saw the faint beginnings of her memories, the days and moments that had shaped who she was.

Time lost meaning. Viessa and I kept dancing, and the tide kept changing, bringing new morsels with it. I drank their fear like it was wine, small sips from an ever-filling glass, and soon I was buzzing. Buzzing, and I hadn't had a single drop of alcohol.

It got to the point that I felt nauseous and dizzy. Knowing that I should be alarmed by this, I leaned close to Viessa, who was dancing with her curly-haired partner again.

"Be right back," I shouted. The queen nodded, flapping her hand to indicate she'd heard me.

I turned and fought through the crowd again, heading for the doorway closest to me. An EXIT sign glowed above it. Slamming my palms against the long, metal bar, I stepped into an area clearly meant for smokers. High above us, a tarp was strung across the space between the buildings, shielding clubbers from heavy, fat raindrops. The cold was merciless, already numbing the tip of my nose and ears. After I'd taken several deep breaths, I hugged myself and looked toward the street, wondering if I should just text Viessa and leave. The frigid temperature had brought me back to myself, and now I couldn't stop thinking about those pregnancy tests. It deflated any desire to go back inside.

"Fortuna."

The voice made me shriek, and I spun around.

"Collith." I let out a breath, my muscles turning to liquid, before I remembered where we were. A group of humans that stood nearby were staring. My eyes narrowed at the faerie who'd appeared beside me, wondering if he was shielding himself from sight. I probably looked like I was talking to the air. Annoyance clung to my voice as I demanded, "What are you doing here? Have you been following me?"

"Look inside my head," Collith said by way of greeting. Drops of rain nestled in his hair and eyelashes, and a black coat protected the rest of him. "See for yourself whether I'm telling the truth. You should have no difficulty finding anything—most of my memories are wrapped in fear."

"I've *been* inside your head. I've got enough to talk to my therapist about," I retorted. Collith was silent now. He stood there, waiting, and there was resolve in the set of his jaw. Blazing from his hazel eyes. He'd probably just keep showing up, wherever I went, making the same demand. I swallowed a sigh.

"I'll make you a deal," Collith said, unaware that I'd been about to give in. "The same one I offered a lifetime ago, when you let me win that game of Connect Four."

"I didn't let you—" I started automatically.

"If you go through my head, and you still don't believe me afterward," he continued, ignoring me, "I'll leave you alone. Permanently."

I closed my mouth and eyed Collith in contemplation. "You'll leave me *and* my family alone. No more loopholes," I told him.

"Fine," he said. "No more loopholes… and no more secrets, Fortuna."

The faerie held out his hand, as he'd done so many times before. I stared down at it, his splayed fingers glowing in a slant of light. In that moment, it felt like I'd known Collith all my life and he'd always been there, offering a lifeline. And despite every mistake he had made—despite every mistake *I* had made—I could no longer imagine a reality without him in it. Collith had led me through the darkness and walked through it at my side.

I raised my gaze to his, keeping every thought hidden. I wasn't sure how I felt about the revelation I'd just had. "I'll only be able to see the memories affected by fear. Hardly what I'd call an all-access pass," I said.

A faint, humorless smile curved Collith's lips. "I'm always afraid. It's how I've survived for so long."

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I just focused on his hand. We both knew I didn’t need physical contact anymore, but I reached for Collith anyway, my decision made. I entwined my fingers with his, eyes sliding shut. I encountered his mental wall, and he didn’t flinch as it fell.

And then I was running headlong into the darkness.

Just as I remembered, Collith’s mind was a series of rooms and doorways, like a house in a fairy tale. Except the doorways were strange and jarring—I couldn’t open them with a knob. One memory just became another one, the two of them linked in some noticeable way.

I went into a memory I hadn’t encountered before, drawn by the prickle of fear.

The instant my mind adjusted, I recognized the room. I also recognized the faerie laying on the bed, her skin pearly in the firelight. *Viessa*.

The last time I was here, Collith had fought my hold on him. I hadn’t been able to watch the rest of this memory unfold.

“Why haven’t you moved into the king’s suite?” Viessa asked now, trailing her fingers down the center of his chest. The two of them were naked, tangled up in the bedsheets. A fireplace crackled on the other side of the room.

Collith looked around, as if Viessa’s question was something he’d never considered. “Those rooms are haunted by fear and pain,” he said slowly. “No exorcism could cleanse them of it. I’d be living amongst the ghosts of my father’s evil. Not what I’d call a tempting prospect, my lady.”

She made a sound of sympathy, and then they were kissing. Collith pressed his erection against her, and Viessa’s tangled her fingers in his wild hair. I glanced around the room, frowning. Why had I detected fear within this memory?

I was about to continue on my way when Viessa pulled back and looked Collith in the eye. She cupped his cheek, and a tear glistened on her own, as if they were posing for a painting.

“It’s finally time, my love. I’m so sorry,” Viessa whispered.

Collith frowned. It was all he had a chance to do before Viessa's other hand appeared. This one held a knife—I saw the glint of firelight off metal an instant before she buried it in Collith's back.

As his lifeblood poured onto the bed, staining the sheets blue, it felt like I was watching the last of his trust leaving him, too. Viessa saw it, too, and she watched her lover die with unveiled anguish. Unshed tears glistened in her eyes. Maybe the future queen really *had* loved Collith, in her own twisted way.

I turned my attention back to Collith. It was harder than it should've been, seeing him choke on his own blood again. Even if I knew that he'd survive this.

I was still staring at Collith when his body completely disappeared.

Viessa's hands fell, the place where she'd been touching his chest now empty air. Collith himself stood next to the fire, holding the knife that had just been in his back. There was no wound, though, and no blood on the clothes he was suddenly wearing. A crown rested on his head and there was a glass of wine in his other hand, which Collith sipped from as he brought the knife closer to his face.

He cast an illusion, I thought. None of it had been real.

Viessa was coming to the same realization. She stared at Collith with open-mouthed shock. She was still naked, but neither of them seemed to care about that anymore.

"Drenched in holy water, I expect," the new king said, the first words he'd spoken since witnessing his lover try to kill him. Collith inspected the blade as if he were a collector considering a piece, but had found it wanting. It was made of obsidian stone, and a red jewel gleamed from the leather hilt.

Viessa closed her mouth and swallowed. Her voice was tight as she asked, "How did you know?"

Collith looked at her coldly. "Does it matter?"

"I like to learn from my mistakes."

"So do I." He took another drink of wine, then placed his glass on the mantle. "I was almost killed by one of my lovers. I'd be a fool to let my guard down like that again."

Viessa tilted her head. "Was none of it genuine, then?"

"I could ask you the same question." Collith finally met her gaze, and his eyes were darker than I'd ever seen them. He tossed the knife onto the

bed, showing Viessa, without words, just how small of a threat he found her. “I didn’t truly begin to doubt you until my father revealed what he’d learned about us. We’d been so careful, I kept thinking. How did he know? How? Granted, these passages are full of spies, but I keep myself hidden from sight. *You* must’ve planted the seed. Pretended to confide in a loose-tongued friend, maybe, or even spoken to one of the council members. I had no way of knowing, so I began using precautions during our time together. Which is how it came to pass that I just got to be a witness to my own murder.”

Hearing the note of loathing in his voice, Viessa quirked a brow—by all appearances, she was unaffected by the deterioration of what they’d once been, but I knew better. Viessa Folduin was trickier than most faeries, and she knew how to hide any hurt she might’ve felt. There was nothing in her voice as she said, “I underestimated you, *Your Majesty*. So what happens now?”

“For you, nothing. Undoing Sylvyre’s corruption within this Court will require all my attention; I don’t have time or patience for traitors.” Collith strode to the door.

This was a version of him I hadn’t seen in a long time. This was the dark king that had sat on his throne while Death Bringer whipped me. Unable to look away, I stared at Collith’s face as he stepped aside for a contingent of Guardians in the passageway.

They seized Viessa from the bed, and the sheets fell off. Still acting unaware of her nudity, Viessa wrenched at the Guardians who’d taken hold of her. She glared at Collith, who was halfway out the door. “How long do you plan to imprison me? Is there to be a tribunal?”

He paused, then said over his shoulder, “You’ve read the laws. Sylvyre was not a compassionate person, by any means, but he was even less so when it came to treason. You’re not entitled to a tribunal. Just judgment.”

Viessa’s eyes widened in horror. “Wait. Wait, Collith, I’m sorry. Please don’t—”

Disturbed by the sound of her wails, I yanked out of the memory so hard that I went reeling into a different one, falling backward through rooms and time.

When my mind had adjusted yet again, I was still at the Unseelie Court, but now I stood in the throne room.

The cavernous space was bloated with faeries and silence. It looked different from how I'd left it during my rule, and how it had appeared during Collith's. Different tapestries, more medieval touches. There also seemed to be dead animals everywhere I looked, in the form of mounts on the walls or placed on platters.

Collith stood at the foot of the dais.

Once I saw him, I had trouble seeing anything else. His hair was shorter, his body thinner. His face still bore that familiar scar, but it looked fresher, somehow. Angry and pink, rather than the faded version I'd come to know. His gaze was fixed on something behind me, and it was a black look I'd never seen him give anyone, not even Laurie.

I frowned and turned around.

When I realized who was in the throne, I felt my jaw slacken and my heartbeat quicken.

This clearly wasn't one of the memories Collith had wanted me to see, since it had nothing to do with us. I could feel him all around, though, which meant Collith knew what I'd found. Yet he didn't speak or try to push me out.

Curiosity kept my feet rooted in place, and my attention lingered on the faerie sitting above everyone. I'd never seen Sylvyre before. Not like this, at least—there was a depiction of him within the Mural of Ulesse. But despite the artist's talent, that painting hadn't done him justice. I wasn't sure any artist could.

Sylvyre was an original angel, and I had never been more aware of that fact. Power emanated from him like a heat wave. It surged past me, and it felt like I heard a voice in my ear, telling me to bow. Bow to this great, terrifying being, who had deigned to grace me with his presence.

No wonder they'd given him a throne.

I gritted my teeth and resisted, reminding myself that I wasn't truly here and I didn't bow to anyone. Especially not to assholes who murdered their wives.

The Unseelie King—the old Unseelie King, I corrected myself silently—sat in his enormous wooden chair, gripping the armrests with elegant fingers. His clothing looked like a mixture of wool, linen, and animal skins. Most of his body was hidden beneath a tunic and trousers, but here and there, I could see the bulge of honed muscle.

Sylvyre stared down at Collith with eyes of the brightest blue, like the tropical seas I'd only seen in pictures or screens. His skin was smooth and golden. His hair draped over his shoulders in a black, silken curtain. I could see the similarities between father and son, but there was something hard about Sylvyre's features. As if they'd been hewn from granite. Somehow, I knew that a kiss from those lips would be crushing, rather than caressing.

Why are you thinking about kissing Collith's father? I grimaced and refocused on the Unseelie Prince, who glared at Sylvyre as if he wasn't cowed in the slightest. I could feel Collith's terror, though. He may not have grown up amongst the fae, but that hadn't stopped him from mastering their ways—his face was cold and withdrawn, just as it had been during my tribunal.

"Undo it," he said. There was no waver in his voice, either. It echoed through the vast space.

"You do not give me orders, boy," Sylvyre answered softly, his azure eyes brightening even more. I felt, rather than saw, some in the crowd stiffen. They knew that tone; they knew it meant danger. But then Sylvyre relaxed and waved his hand. Someone nearby let out a relieved sigh. "Even if it were possible, I have no interest in undoing it. Traitors to the crown deserve punishment."

"My mother was no traitor," Collith said through his teeth.

Sylvyre leaned forward. "Ah! So you admit it? That it was *you* who conspired with the Folduins to take my throne?"

"All I have done is fall in love with a Folduin," Collith countered. "There was no plot."

Sylvyre made a sound of disdain. "You are either a liar or a fool. The Folduins have plotted against our bloodline for as long as this Court has existed, boy."

Collith's expression didn't change, but something in the air shifted. The torches quivered, as if a gust of air had disturbed them. Whispers erupted in the crowd, and I noticed several figures hurrying toward the exits. "Summon the witch and undo the spell, right now, or I will kill you," Collith said.

"No, you won't." The king's dismissal was so absolute, so thorough, that he didn't even bother telling Collith to leave. He turned his head, making a gesture with two fingers, and the Tongue leaned close to say

something in Sylvyre's ear. They carried on a hushed conversation, utterly disregarding Collith, who stayed where he was and tried not to clench his fists like a petulant child.

"I challenge you."

Once again, every voice in the room went silent. Sylvyre slowly turned his head, and the way he looked at Collith made my stomach quake.

"I will give you one chance. One chance, boy, to tuck your tail between your legs and run. You won't outrun the shame, but you will live," the king said.

Collith didn't move. "For what you've done to my mother, Naevys, the Queen of the Unseelie Court, I challenge you. And I will kill you."

I expected Sylvyre to laugh or smile, as Jassin would have, but he did neither. Collith's father just peered down with a gleam in his eye and said, "Very well. Tongue, make your preparations."

Jumping to attention, the Tongue summoned a slave. I could see the whites of his eyes and knew—he was utterly petrified of Sylvyre.

From my own battle with Jassin, I knew that Sylvyre would get to choose the weapon. I genuinely had no idea what to expect from him. Would he select swords? Some kind of magic? Hand-to-hand combat? The entire Court waited in tense silence.

"The weapon of choice, Your Majesty?" the Tongue called, turning from the slave.

Resting his elbow on the armrest, Sylvyre tapped his cheek with his middle finger, the gesture effortlessly fluid. A lock of hair spilled over his shoulder. "I choose… heavenly fire."

Oh, you're a twisted prick, I thought. Sylvyre planned to kill his son with the very fire that ran through Collith's veins.

The Tongue said something else in the human's ear, and she hurried off through the crowd.

Still ignoring Collith, Sylvyre made a gesture, and yet another slave came forward. A tree nymph, if her shriveled wings were any indication. Unlike the fae, whose wings fell off shortly after birth, tree nymphs retained theirs. Unfortunately, they were strictly ornamental. Extended to their full length, her wings would be golden and covered in black spots. There weren't many dryads left—their chrysalides were highly sought for their fertility properties, and more often than not, black market sellers took the chrysalis while a nymph was still growing inside it.

The female trembled from head to toe as she removed Sylvyre's tunic, then his shirt.

Fully clothed, Sylvyre had been intimidating. Half-naked, he was terrifying. His physique looked like it had been formed from clay, but it wasn't beautiful, as Collith's was. His body belonged on battlefields and inside fighting rings.

As the nymph backed away, holding the king's clothing in a white-knuckled grip, Sylvyre gestured to the Tongue again. The heavyset faerie hurried down the steps, his beads rattling into the stillness. The first slave was already weaving through the masses again, holding a wide, wooden bowl in her palms. It would contain the ingredients for the Tongue's spell.

Soon enough, father and son were in a circle, and both were in possession of heavenly fire thanks to the Tongue's spell.

They began in a fury. Light and flame filled the circle, and the faeries dodged with graceful dips and turns, as though their deadly battle was just a dance. Again and again, father and son locked eyes across the confined space. Magic crackled everywhere.

In spite of their breathtaking speed, it felt like Sylvyre was… toying with Collith, somehow. He was thousands of years old, and he had all the power of an angel, Fallen or not. Collith was outmatched. I knew it, he knew it, and so did the entire Unseelie Court. I took my eyes off them for an instant, scanning the faces at the front of the crowd. I didn't know what I was looking for, only that my instincts were rattling. *Threat. Threat.*

"Never expect your opponent to fight fair," I whispered, returning my gaze to Sylvyre with a creeping sense of dread.

The king had apparently gotten bored, or decided the battle was over, because he moved in a blur—it was proof that he'd been holding back all this time. A knife appeared in Sylvyre's hand like magic, and I made a sound of outrage, searching for the Tongue. Wasn't that against the fucking rules?

I longed to leap forward, but I couldn't enter the circle. No one could.

Collith grabbed onto Sylvyre's fist with both hands, stopping the knife just a hairsbreadth above his heart.

He was so focused on keeping that tip from penetrating his flesh that he forgot Sylvyre's other hand, which was still free. With ice in his eyes, Sylvyre lifted it and directed a blast of fire at Collith's face. The prince

saw it coming and jerked to the side, but not far enough. The flames blasted into Collith's shoulder, incinerating his skin in an instant.

His scream tore through the throne room.

Everything in me wanted to rush at Sylvyre. Grab his mind in my talons and shred it to ribbons. Stare into his eyes and smile while his blood ran across the flagstones. But I couldn't, because all of this had already happened.

Sylvyre's lip curled and his eyes glittered. He drew his arm back, readying for another strike, and Collith was still trying to keep the knife away. This time, the blue flames sizzled into the left side of his chest, and the air filled with the smell of burning flesh. As Collith threw his head back and screamed again, I reminded myself that he'd survived. He'd healed.

Sylvyre leaned close, putting his mouth next to Collith's ear. The tip of the knife sank into his chest. "You were my punishment, you know," the king said. "I rebelled against Him, and he saw fit to give me a son like *you*. Weak. Soft. Disappointing."

"At least I'm not predictable," Collith rasped.

His father frowned. Before Sylvyre could react further, the knife in his hand burst into flame. It latched onto the king's skin as if it were kerosene, and then all of him was burning.

Collith's blood must've been the final ingredient of a spell placed on the blade, I realized.

From the moment he'd stepped into the throne room, Collith had been one step ahead of his father. He'd known his father would fight dirty and he'd ensured Sylvyre's dagger was bespelled, then put it back.

The entire Court watched helplessly as their king burned—after all, no one could enter the circle until one of the faeries inside was dead. Collith had planned all of it, down to the smallest detail.

Once the sound of Sylvyre's bellows had faded away, his son walked up to the throne. Collith faced the entire room and sat without hesitation. His expression didn't betray the pain he must've felt, physical or otherwise. His shirt clung to him in burnt tatters, and smoke still rose from the bloody injuries along his chest, shoulder, and rib cage.

The cry started somewhere in the middle of the room. Others took it up quickly. Soon it filled the entire cavern, echoing through history. "The king is dead, long live the king!"

Every faerie in the room went to their knees, and Collith observed them silently, his face made of stone. After a few moments, he lifted his fist, which was encircled by crackling bits of lightning. He punched it in the air, shouting. The sound was grief, and triumph, and hope all in one. No one else seemed to hear it…

No one but the faerie leaning against a nearby pillar, his eyes meeting Collith's in a flash of silver just before he sifted.

I blinked, and suddenly the scene was gone, replaced by vibrant green grass and soft-edged dapples of sunlight. Collith and Laurie were on the ground, their naked bodies twined together, both moving in a slow, anticipatory rhythm.

Just like that, I knew which memory this was. I was moving backward through Collith's life, starting from what had happened most recently and finishing with the furthest parts of his past. This was the day Laurie and Collith had sex for the first time, and both of their lives shattered.

I watched Laurie bury his fingers in Collith's hair and kiss him as if his wildest dream had come true. Oddly, I felt no jealousy. I couldn't. They truly loved each other, and it was the sort of love that most people spent a lifetime searching for, only to settle for a pale imitation.

I'd already seen the rest; I knew how this story ended. Suddenly, I had no desire to keep rifling through Collith's head. I removed myself with careful, delicate movements, and then we were back in the alley. I waited until Collith's eyes opened to say, "I don't need to see any more."

He made a tired, helpless gesture. "Fortuna, the first time I had sex, I had no idea what it would mean. What I was capable of. She was just a normal, human girl. No power at all. She moved away and I met Laurie shortly after. As you know, he has power in abundance. When I took it from him, I had no control. I didn't choose it. That didn't stop Laurie from killing my mother, though. And as I watched her suffer every day, for years on end, I couldn't imagine ever trusting someone with my secret. Not after that."

Collith fell silent, and I felt it again—the urge to feel bad for him. *Forgive* him. To my dismay, I couldn't find a glimmer of the old resentment that once lit up my insides, and my heart slammed against the walls I'd built around it.

"I should go back inside," I whispered. "Viessa is probably looking for me."

Collith let me go. I climbed the concrete steps. Just as I reached the door, I remembered the other truth I'd learned tonight. I paused and looked back at Collith. "I took two pregnancy tests. They were both negative. I'll take another one, just to make sure, but… they were negative. I thought you might want to know."

He absorbed this for a moment. "You seem disappointed," he said.

I *was* disappointed. I couldn't pretend otherwise. But how could I possibly explain it to Collith in a way he'd understand?

A strange impulse came over me. I studied Collith, frowning, and slowly went back down the stairs. "As thanks for being kind to Savannah when she came to Court, Mercy paid me a visit," I told him.

I shouldn't have been able to show him one of *my* memories, not to mention there was no trace of fear tucked within its strands. But I expressed a desire to show him the face in my mind, and when I heard Collith's swift intake, the softest of gasps, I knew it had worked. He'd seen her. Our child with the rosebud lips and a head full of hair.

Christine. That was what I had named her.

I didn't wait to see Collith's reaction. I drifted back up the stairs, and I reentered the club without looking back. The door slammed behind me.

This time, I had a drink.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

It was nearing sunrise when I got home.

The escort Viessa sent with me vanished at the tree line, and he didn't bother saying goodbye. It had been a silent walk from the Door to Cyrus's land—the faerie was one I didn't know, and I was distracted, thinking about all the things I'd seen in Collith's head tonight. My emotions felt like tangles and knots, which was why I barely noticed when the Guardian left. I stepped onto the lawn alone, pushing a snow-covered branch out of my way.

Then I lifted my head and got my first look at the homestead. To my surprise, every light in the loft blazed bright. Why was everyone awake? Had something happened? And why was Damon pacing in front of the barn?

I broke into a run, cursing the heels I was wearing. They were better than bare feet, though. Damon heard me coming and lifted his head. His eyes were wild. Finn sat near the barn doors wearing his wolf shape. He watched me approach, already scanning my body for anything amiss.

"I didn't know what to do," Damon blurted the moment I was within earshot. "I told her that seeing Matthew was probably a bad idea—it would just confuse him when she left again—but she threatened to call a lawyer. Do I even have legal rights here, Fortuna? Now they're up there, alone, because Savannah asked me to give them some privacy. Oh, fuck, what if she takes him?"

"Okay, take a breath, please. You need to breathe, Damon." I glanced up at the window, as if I'd see Savannah standing there. "Is Emma with them?"

“No.” Damon shook his head. “She’s in the house with Cyrus.”

I frowned at this. Emma was fiercely protective of children, and she already loved Matthew like a grandson. It seemed strange that she would...

Oh, fuck. My confusion cleared. Of course Emma wouldn’t want to be in the same space as the necromancer. Savannah was the one who killed Fred. She hadn’t been the one to rip his chest open, but it was a creature she was responsible for.

“Nym is up there, though,” Damon added, as if that meant something. Our faerie roommate wouldn’t be much help in a situation like this. Or any situation, really. Nym meant well, but most of the time, he wasn’t sure which day it was. He called Matthew The Tiny One.

Before I could ask Damon what else Savannah had said, she emerged from the barn, slipping through the doors as if she wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible. Matthew’s baby monitor glowed in her hand. Savannah’s auburn hair had grown in the brief time since I’d seen her last, and now the pixie cut looked like a jaw-length bob. She wore what looked like the castoffs of a fae courtier. A gown of thick, red velvet and a velvet-lined cloak.

She looks good, I admitted reluctantly.

“I put him back to bed. I’m sorry I came so late,” Savannah said. She held the baby monitor out to Damon, who took it wordlessly. That was when the necromancer noticed me, and her mouth puckered in confusion—she could probably sense the magic disguising my face.

Belanor may have known where I was, but I still had a lot of enemies that didn’t. I wanted to keep it that way. I waited until Savannah’s gaze met mine. Trying to be subtle, I glanced at the ring on my finger.

“It’s a blending spell,” I said under my breath.

Savannah’s face cleared, and she shifted her focus away. It landed back on Damon. We watched her visibly take a breath before she said, “I want more time with him.”

“No.” Damon didn’t pretend to think about it. “You raise the dead just by being near a body, Sav.”

She didn’t flinch. Instead, Savannah held her head high, and her voice came out firmer. “It isn’t a problem as long as I stay away from graveyards and funeral homes.”

Damon opened his mouth to respond, and I could tell from his expression that there was an argument coming. “I’m going to check on

Matthew," I said quickly.

Both of them looked at me, but I didn't wait for a response. I walked toward the doors, and Finn promptly got to his feet, readying to follow me. Damon's voice floated through the frigid air.

"You left him, Savannah. On the fucking doorstep."

"That wasn't because of my… issues. I was being *hunted*, Damon."

"Issues? Is that what you call it?" I heard Damon say as I pulled the barn door open. "And if you were being hunted, what changed? Why is it safe to come back now?"

Savannah's response was too faint to make out. I crossed the first floor of the barn, my heels making clicking sounds against the concrete. Finn loped past me, his fluffy tail swishing. He went upstairs without hesitation. I stopped at the bottom of the steps, using the railing for support, and slipped off both shoes. They dangled from the tips of my fingers while I started up the stairwell after Finn.

At the top, the lights in the kitchen hit my eyes. I didn't react to the brightness—I was completely sober. Seeing Savannah in our home, knowing she'd been near Matthew, had burned away the magic in my veins like wildfire over a field of dry grass.

Finn was already on the rug in front of the fireplace. Someone had left the flames on, but at a muted setting. They cast the faintest of glows over that side of the room.

Feeling an inexplicable urge to check on everyone, I went to Nym's bedroom first. I tapped softly, and the door cracked open at the gentle touch. Light fell over the floor, reaching toward the bed. Nym slept on, his brown curls draping over the pillow as if he were a prince in a fairy tale. His face looked peaceful, for once. There was no sign of the worry lines that always made him appear older. I crept backward, pulling the door shut without a sound.

Matthew was next. My nephew slept in his crib, facing me. His breath came in soft, long sounds, and his mouth formed a perfect O. It struck me for the thousandth time how much he looked like Damon.

It felt like I had stolen Nym's ability to travel through time, and I was now standing in the doorway of my baby brother's room. Checking on him as I always did, because I'd made a promise.

Feeling a rush of protectiveness, I stepped back and closed that door, too. On my way back to the kitchen, I paused to listen for any sounds from

outside, but Damon and Savannah were either keeping their voices down or finished with their conversation. Finn appeared to be asleep—his eyes were squeezed shut and the glow of the fire shone around him like a burnt silhouette. He yelped, over and over, but it was more with his body than his mouth. His big paws twitched.

Smiling faintly, I sat in one of the stools. I pulled out my phone to respond to some texts. It was so late, but I wanted to stay awake for Damon. As I started typing a message to Bea, my gaze flicked toward the clock over the stove. That was when I noticed the teddy bear on the counter—it must've been a gift from Savannah. I didn't recognize it. I also noticed the bottle of wine Damon and Danny must've taken off the wine rack and opened for dinner. Picking it up, I glanced at the alcohol content and made a surprised sound. *Fifteen percent. Not bad.*

Slowly, I put the wine back. Even more slowly, I returned my gaze to the screen in front of me. I mentally recited a list of reasons why I couldn't remove the cork from that bottle and pour myself a glass.

Damon came upstairs a few minutes later.

Relieved, I put my phone down and turned toward him. He placed the baby monitor on the countertop and sat, rubbing his face. Damon's voice was muffled when he said, "I've never felt like this before."

Compassion panged in my chest. I shifted, moving closer, and rested my head on his shoulder. "I think you've discovered your worst fear, little brother," I murmured.

He made a soft sound, not quite a laugh, not quite a sigh. "It's my job to protect him, isn't it? But it doesn't feel right, keeping a mother from her son. Then I remember Fred. I see the moment he…"

His jaw worked, and suddenly I could see that moment, too. I blinked it away, along with the sound of Fred's scream. Damon had gone still beside me, radiating fear and pain. I frantically tried to think of how to help. Life would be so much easier if it were as black and white as the humans believed. But the truth was, life was covered in shades of gray.

Because I didn't know what else to say, I gave Damon the words that had meant so much to me when nothing in my world had made sense: "I'm here."

I shifted again, giving him a sideways hug. We stayed like that for a minute or two, our temples pressed together, his breathing a soft sound in my ear. The stillness ended when the baby monitor crackled. There was the

soft sound of rustling sheets. Damon straightened, rubbing his eyes. “I better check on him,” he said.

I flashed a sympathetic smile. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“No.” Damon picked up the monitor and stood. “You’ve been through enough.”

“So have you,” I countered.

The monitor had gone quiet again. For a moment, neither of us moved or spoke. Slowly, Damon eased back onto the stool. When more seconds passed and it became clear Matthew had fallen back asleep, he relaxed. Then his eyes fell upon the teddy bear—the one Savannah had brought—and his mouth tightened. I knew he was thinking about the confrontation with her again.

“I tell myself that everything will be okay, and then I remember how much went wrong for our parents,” Damon said, his voice soft, “They probably told themselves the same thing. And I’m so much weaker than they were.”

He wasn’t just talking about tonight’s visit from Savannah; I could hear Jassin’s shadow in my brother’s voice now. Suddenly I had an urge to grab that bottle and pour out two drinks. I rested my temple against my fist, hiding the wine from view.

“Are you kidding?” I demanded. “The fact that you’re standing next to me right now is proof of how strong you are.”

Damon made a soft sound of doubt. “I don’t feel strong.”

“Want to know a secret? Neither do I.” I gave him a bittersweet smile. A brief pause fell between us, and I used it to gather the nerve for what I was about to say. “Would you do it all over again? Get in my car the day I turned eighteen?”

It was a question that had haunted me for years. For a moment, my brother just looked at me. Really looked at me, the way he had before that evil bastard kidnapped him. Then Damon said, as if it were so simple, “We made a promise.”

I blinked rapidly, but the countertop blurred anyway. I moved to leave the stool, clearing my throat. “I’m going to get ready for bed. Let me know if you need anything,” I said with a tremulous smile. “And try not to worry. We’re going to figure this out. Promise.”

As I stood, I felt that unmistakable sensation of something inside me coming loose. An instant later, my underwear was slightly damp.

Realization raced through me and sent my pulse into a frenzy.

I'd gotten my period.

Part of me really had believed the pregnancy tests were wrong. I gripped the edge of the counter, staring at the cupboards without seeing them. Damon was looking at me with alarm now. "Fortuna? Are you okay?"

I'm not pregnant. The thought was like a bell. It clanged, then faded away. Just when I thought it was gone, it came back. *I'm not pregnant*.

Why did it feel as if I'd lost something? I remembered Collith's remark outside the club. *You seem disappointed.*

Without warning, the face of that rosy-cheeked baby loomed in my mind's eye. I made a strange sound, so faint Damon didn't hear it. Something halfway between a sob and a sigh. "Yeah, fine," I said finally. "Sorry. Just got a cramp."

The baby monitor went off before Damon could respond. He pushed to his feet, moving as if he were a hundred years old. I pushed my stool beneath the counter, which drew my gaze toward that bottle again. It glinted from the lights hanging over the island.

Why not? I thought. I succumbed to the impulse to wrap my hand around its glass neck. "Mind if I finish this off?"

"Yes. I can't watch you do this to yourself again," Damon muttered.

I kissed his cheek. "Then look the other way. Love you."

I took the bottle with me into the bedroom and closed the door.

The next time I opened my eyes, and the lines of the alarm clock became solid, the numbers said it was past four o'clock in the afternoon. I'd slept another day away.

I sat up without thinking, and I was instantly reminded why I didn't like to drink—pain hammered at my temples like there were small, invisible creatures swinging mallets at them. Groaning, I forced myself into a vertical position and went in search of something that would make me feel better, pocketing my phone as I went.

Finn was in his usual spot in front of the fireplace. The second my bedroom door opened, he lifted his head and gave me an assessing look. I

yawned as I lumbered past him and Matthew, who was rolling a plastic train across the floor. “I’m fine, Finn. I just need some coffee,” I mumbled.

Damon looked up from the book in his hands. It must’ve still been the weekend, because he sat on the couch, wearing jeans and his favorite gray hoodie. An empty plate rested on the side table next to him. Damon didn’t seem to be aware of the worry tinging his smile. “Good morning, sister of mine. Or should I say, good afternoon? There’s half a pot of coffee over there. I just made it a couple hours ago.”

Giving him a feeble smile of thanks, I made my way over to the kitchen. “Where is Emma?”

“She went to Denver for the day. Visiting some friends, I think.”

“Oh, good. I’m glad she’s having fun.” I pressed my hand against my forehead, then reached for a clean coffee mug.

“Danny should be here any second. It isn’t quite Matthew’s bedtime yet, so we thought we’d watch a movie.” Damon paused. “Do you want to join us?”

In response to this, I finished pouring my coffee, walked across the room, and sank onto the couch beside my brother. He smiled and went back to his book. I pulled out my phone and responded to messages from Maureen, Bea, and, of all people, Viessa. I also sent a text to Lyari, trying to disguise the fact that I was checking on her. She’d probably consider it an insult, somehow.

A few minutes later, the door to the loft opened. Danny walked inside first, followed by a thin figure with a shock of bleached hair. While the deputy hung his coat, Gil and I locked eyes, and we were instantly grinning.

“Found this one on the road,” Danny remarked, striding toward the couch. He bent and gave Damon a gentle kiss, bringing a rush of cold with him.

The vampire dropped onto the cushion next to me. He didn’t seem to notice that he’d sat right on one of Matthew’s toys. “Well, I don’t have a car, do I?” Gil groused. “And there’s no such thing as Uber in this godforsaken town.”

“You just can’t stay away, can you?” I teased.

He’d finally noticed the toy. Gil twisted around, searching for it. His shoulder brushed mine. The instant our bodies made contact, I saw some

of the tension visibly leave him. It was the bond, I realized, watching the lines of his face relax, too. The bond made it difficult to have distance between us. Days ago, Gil had felt nothing for me, a complete stranger. Now, regardless of how he probably *wanted* to feel, he was most at ease whenever we were together.

It was wrong.

Finn was still resting on the floor nearby. He watched the two of us intently.

"What did you do today?" I asked the wolf, resisting the urge to prod him with my foot. No matter how close I felt with Finn, I always strove to remember there was a person buried under all that fur. I wanted to ask if he'd been watching Amy again.

"I swear to God, sometimes it seems as if he actually understands you," Danny remarked.

At this, I darted a glance toward Damon. I'd never directly asked how much his boyfriend knew—about Finn, about Fallen, all of it—but Danny's comment was proof that he was completely in the dark.

"So what movie are we going to watch?" I asked abruptly. Damon shot me a grateful look.

Since Matthew was here, we decided on *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Gil got up to dim the lights, and Hello let out a pitiful mewl. Damon tucked his arm around Danny while Danny covered their legs with a blanket. Credits started on the screen.

"Yeah, I see how you're looking at them," Gil said in my ear. He'd come back without making a sound. "Don't go getting any ideas. If you try to cuddle me, I'll eat you."

My mouth twitched, and I knocked him away with my shoulder. Then I thought of Finn. Worried he'd take Gil's words literally, I glanced toward the werewolf. When I saw he was fast asleep, I relaxed and returned my attention to the TV. Hello tucked herself between me and Gil. I stroked her back while he scratched her chin.

Drawn by all the music and sound, Nym slipped out of his room to join us. He sat on the floor and clasped his boney knee, resting his spine against the base of the couch. Seeing the childlike expression on the faerie's face, I wondered if he hadn't seen many movies. As this one went on, I found myself watching him more than the screen.

At one point, Hello started purring. The vibrations traveled through me and soothed whatever worry had been lingering in my heart. Sitting there, surrounded by people I cared about and trusted, I almost felt… happy. This was the life I wanted. This was the future worth fighting for. I looked at the faces around me again and made a soft sound that no one but Finn seemed to hear. His eyes cracked open, then slid right back shut. He released a sound similar to the one I'd just let out, and I smiled.

As the minutes ticked past, I toyed with the idea of texting Laurie or Collith. The fact I didn't know which one to choose kept me from reaching for my phone. But then an alarm went off, and I snatched it up anyway.

Damon glanced at me with a question in his eyes. *Is everything okay?*

I nodded and smiled, but I was distracted. Then, annoyed—there was an event on my calendar. It was misspelled, which further supported the theory that I'd made the appointment last night. Consuelo had an online booking system, I remembered suddenly.

Sometime after my confrontation with Collith in the alley, I'd scheduled an emergency therapy session.

My first instinct was to cancel it, but it was too late now. I wouldn't even have time to shower. Muffling a curse, I leaned over and murmured an explanation to Damon, knowing the others would hear, too. As soon as I uttered the word *therapist*, my brother exuded relief. He didn't utter a single protest when I got up.

Moving with slow reluctance, I walked over to the stairs. I shoved my feet into a pair of boots, removed my coat from one of the hooks, and pulled it on. Keys jangled in the right pocket.

"I guess I'll see you later," I called from the doorway, hoping one of them would give me an excuse not to go.

"Love you," Damon replied without looking away from the TV. He said the words absently.

Finn. Finn would save me. I turned toward the fireplace. Matthew had fallen asleep against Finn's stomach—none of us had bothered taking him to bed, since he was safer with the werewolf than he'd ever be in a crib—and the expression on my friend's furry face said he wasn't moving for the world. But as I stood there, his bright gaze dropped to my fingers, checking for the goblin ring. Reassured, Finn put his big head back down on the floor, closed his eyes, and heaved a contented sigh.

No one could be depended on these days. Sighing, I trudged down the stairs and out to the van.

Music exploded from the speakers, just how I liked it, but I didn't hear it tonight. I was too nervous. I put Consuelo's address into a GPS app and turned in the direction of Denver, my headlights beaming onto a frozen, empty road.

Then, in the blink of an eye, I was back in that pretty house, facing Consuelo across a pretty room. We sat in the same spots we'd occupied during our last session. I looked around at the beige walls, trickling fountain, and floral rug. There were also two plush couches and one oil painting of a meadow. A solitary figure stood in the middle of that meadow, more of a dark smear than a person.

"What would you like to talk about today?" Consuelo asked. She wore a button-down blouse and a knotted headwrap made out of cambaya fabric. Like last time, the human's legs were crossed, and she'd rested a notepad against her knees.

I scratched my cheek, hesitating. "Aren't you supposed to tell me what we talk about?"

"This is your therapy journey," she countered. "You get to decide where it leads."

I didn't like that—it created too many possibilities. There was so much Consuelo didn't know, and countless things I couldn't tell her. Secrets I didn't *want* to tell her. *Sure, let's talk about my parents' brutal murders. Or how about the person I visit in my dreams every night? Oh, I know, can we explore the fact that I was tortured by a demon-possessed faerie for weeks, and I still haven't really thought about it?*

"I've been drinking," I said quickly.

The therapist's face didn't change. "Are you getting drunk when you drink?"

"Yes."

"How often?"

"Almost every night since I got home."

"Why?"

"Actually, can we talk about something else, please?" I strove to phrase the question politely, but it came out sounding strained. As if there were someone sitting next to me, pressing their thumb into one of the

bruises on my arm. Worried I'd offended her, I gave Consuelo a thin smile. "I know that I was the one to bring it up. Sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. How are things with your brother?" she asked me, throwing an invisible lifeline. But this was a question with a complicated answer, too.

"Better," I answered after yet another pause. "He… he told me he loved me earlier. It was probably just a knee-jerk thing."

"Those aren't usually words people use freely," the human remarked.

Her words felt like a pinch on my heart—hope. I didn't know what to say, so Consuelo threw another lifeline. She asked a new question, and I answered it. Our conversation felt like someone forcing a fistful of secrets open, one by one, finger by finger.

Despite this, I forgot to watch the clock again. I only knew our time was up when Consuelo closed her notepad. "After our session today, I will be emailing you a list," she told me. "Sexual assault support groups can be a life changing experience for many survivors."

"Support groups?" I echoed. I shook my head. "No. That's okay. I'm not interested in spilling my guts with an audience."

"Many people find the idea intimidating," Consuelo acknowledged, getting to her feet. "But everyone is there for the same reason. It can be healing, talking to others who've been through experiences like yours."

"Interesting. Look, thanks for fitting me into your schedule. I know you made an exception for this." I walked through the waiting room and into the winter night. Consuelo lingered in the doorway.

"I was glad to do it. Please reach out anytime," she called. I waved, then dug out my keys.

The van was empty when I got in, but it didn't stay that way long—I'd just pulled onto the highway when my senses were assailed by the smell of springtime. "You need to replace this repulsive little vehicle. It reeks of goblin," a velvet voice said.

"I wondered when you were going to show up." I looked over at Laurie, and in an instant I was very aware that I hadn't even showered today. He wore a pinstriped suit, his hair artlessly tousled. A subtle, enticing cologne wafted through the small space.

Laurie leaned his temple against the headrest and gave me a faint smile. His eyes had the glaze of someone who'd had a cocktail or two at the business meeting. "I've been preoccupied since the opera."

“Preoccupied with your campaign?” I asked. I heard the bite in my tone, and I wasn’t sure why it was there. Maybe Laurie hadn’t noticed.

Oh, he noticed. It was obvious in how he’d paused. I waited for Laurie to ask why I even cared, but he merely rolled down the window, just a crack, allowing enough air in that it rustled his perfect hair like ripples through a glassy lake. Thinking it would be like this for the rest of the drive, I let out a breath.

Then Laurie asked, “What were you doing out here?”

“Uh, I was—”

“Wait, sorry, you got a text from Lyari. She says, and I quote, ‘You’re smothering me.’ What did you do?” Laurie lowered my phone and looked at me with raised brows.

My lips twitched. “I asked her how she was.”

“Oh, well, then her annoyance is quite justified. So?”

“So, what?”

“Where were you tonight?” he repeated.

“I was at therapy,” I blurted. Even though I’d been intending to say something vague, the truth slipped out of me. I reminded myself that Laurie had been to Consuelo’s office before, so it wasn’t as if he didn’t know, anyway.

And the truth was, I already had enough choices to be ashamed of. Seeking help wouldn’t be one of them, not anymore.

As I waited for his response, Laurie peered through the windshield, tracking the progress of something in the sky. “Does your therapist know?”

“Know what?”

“What you are.”

“Oh. No, she doesn’t. Weirdly enough, that hasn’t really mattered. I guess humans and fallen angels aren’t as different as we’d like to believe.” I smiled faintly, amused at the thought.

The rings on Laurie’s fingers flashed as he changed the radio station, twisting the knob with his usual grace. He didn’t ask anything else about my therapy, and as the silence continued, relief weaved through the tangle of emotions in my chest, loosening them. I shifted in my seat and pressed down harder on the gas pedal. There wasn’t much to see beyond the windows, but the headlights made signs brighten every so often, and the skyline was a smear of somber colors.

It was strange, sitting in silence with Laurie. He wasn't usually capable of it. After a few more seconds, I started to frown. Was something wrong? I glanced over at him, and in an instant, the tension left me again. It was obvious Laurie had gotten lost in thought—leaning on the headrest, his face slightly turned, he stared out at the night without expression.

There were a countless number of things he could've been thinking about, but I knew exactly who occupied Laurie's mind. I knew, because it was the same for me.

"How is he?" I asked softly.

I saw Laurie's head turn. I kept my eyes on the road, but I didn't need to be looking at him to know he'd raised his eyebrows, creating the expression of pretend shock that made me want to hit something. Usually him.

"You're asking about Collith's well-being? Did Hell freeze over?" Laurie looked down at his feet as if he could see through the bottom of the car and into the other dimension.

I knew this was the part where I rolled my eyes. But then I heard Lensa's voice, saw the worry in the pinched lines around her mouth as she told me, *He acts like himself around you*. An unexpected warmth filled my chest. "Just answer the question," I said, pretending to be exasperated.

Laurie rolled his head against the back of the chair, facing forward, and gazed up at the waning moon. "He spends most of his time at the safe house," he replied with a shrug. "He exercises. He reads. He broods. Very Collith-like things."

I spoke without thinking. "Have you two…"

Though I caught myself, Laurie knew exactly what I'd been about to ask, of course. He smirked at me. "Have we… what?"

"Nothing. Never mind. It's none of my business." I hoped my face wasn't as red as it felt. *Driving. You should be concentrating on driving, Fortuna.* I checked my mirrors with such intensity that I felt sixteen again, taking the exam for my license.

"Jealous?" he asked.

The old Fortuna would have lied. She would've had a retort or an insult ready, skilled as any faerie at dodging the truth. But I could feel another answer filling my throat, too. I didn't let myself think about it, because if I did, I knew I would just talk myself out of it.

"Yes," I said simply.

Laurie paused. If I weren't so nervous, I would've laughed at the expression on his face. "I see," he said eventually. "We need to rectify that. Now, I'm far too pretentious to ravage you in the backseat of a foul van, but if we use the Door at the Unseelie Court, I'd be glad to—"

"You know," I interjected, "I haven't heard from you lately. I've really enjoyed it."

"To answer the question you so rudely asked," Laurie started.

"I *didn't*—"

"No, we haven't fucked. For two reasons." He began to tick them off on his fingers. "The first one is that Lensa, too, is residing at the safe house, along with a few others. Now that Belanor is awake, the palace is no longer a safe place for them, you see. We deviated from the plan the night of our escape, and their involvement could be discovered during the investigation. Anyway, the point is, fucking someone in a place that reeks like my sister and our friends would not be an experience I'd enjoy. And secondly, but perhaps more importantly, when you kill your ex's mother, it effectively ends whatever potential there was to revive the relationship."

"Are you done?" I asked lightly.

"Yes. Now, about the hotel room we'll be reserving. I have a place in mind. Tell me, are you afraid of heights?"

"Laurie." My voice was terse. The prince raised his eyebrows and waited for me to go on, as if he had no idea why I was annoyed. Anyone who didn't know him might believe he was wholly unbothered. Forgetting my mortification, I gave Laurie a hard look from the corner of my eye before refocusing on the road. "You didn't kill Naevys, okay? You did something reckless and impulsive that went horribly wrong."

"You would know," Laurie said, but there was no bite in the words. The light in his eyes was sad, the subtle tilt to his lips more rueful than mischievous.

"You're right. I would know," I replied. Silence rang through the small space. Humans always had a response at the ready. Humans avoided sitting in stillness. But as I'd recently pointed out to Laurie, we weren't humans. My vulnerability floated all around, and we existed in it, breathing it in and out.

The van rolled over a pothole in the road, making both of us lurch in our seats. It brought the moment to an abrupt end. I cleared my throat.

“Jesus. Who knew I’d be having two therapy sessions today? Sorry, I didn’t mean to dump that on you.”

Laurie smiled faintly, and it seemed as though he was about to answer when his eyes flicked downward. His voice was just a bit too casual as he questioned, “What is that?”

My stomach dropped. I followed his gaze and saw that my bruises were peeking out—leftovers from when that giant had sent me flying into a rock wall. I tugged my shirt back into place and shrugged, staying focused on the road. “I fell.”

“You didn’t even put effort into that lie. I can only assume that means I should keep asking until I get the truth.”

“You wouldn’t believe the truth.”

“Try me.”

“Fine.” I gripped the steering wheel tighter and resolved to keep my response shorter this time. “After my parents died, I felt scared and alone. While Damon and I were at our first foster home, I started dreaming about someone. A boy, who became my best friend. I named him Oliver. Dave and Maureen weren’t worried, at first—they thought I was just pretending. That it was a coping mechanism. But years went by and I was still talking about Ollie. Eventually I got smart enough to stop mentioning him. That didn’t make him fade, though. Even now, he’s still there every night I fall asleep.”

Here I paused, my attention snagged by thoughts of the Oliver I’d left only a few hours ago.

“None of this explains the bruises,” Laurie prompted.

“I was getting to that, damn it. Recently, Oliver discovered… memories. My memories, hidden in the furthest recesses of my mind. But they’re not easy to reach, because they’re guarded by things. Creatures, if you can call them that. Manifestations of the stories Mom used to tell me.”

“And you got those bruises facing one of them?” Laurie asked, his voice sharp. “They were on your body when you woke up?”

I looked at him sidelong, frowning. “Yes. Do you know something I don’t?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t keep it from you. Not about this. Those bruises must’ve been significant if they’re still so visible. Does Collith know? About the dreams?”

“He knows the basics. We haven’t exactly been on friendly terms, so I haven’t made him aware of recent developments.”

Laurie made a thoughtful sound. Then the exit for Granby appeared, and I turned on the blinker. It clicked into the silence.

“You don’t have to go back tonight, you know,” Laurie ventured. Surprised, I glanced over at him again. His bright eyes held mine, and they shone with sincerity now. “I saw the way you looked at Stone Hall. I hadn’t realized, until that moment, how little of the world you’ve experienced. It’s a big place, Fortuna, infinitely bigger than the darkness you’ve seen. Let me show it to you.”

Heat built between my legs, responding to the promise in his voice. I shook my head and let out a breath at the same time. “When you say things like that…”

“What? It makes this more difficult to deny? You’re fixated on Collith because you met him first,” Laurie said matter-of-factly. “Because I didn’t fall at your feet with unquestioning devotion.”

“Don’t tell me how I feel, Laurie.” I meant the words to be sharp, as if they were edged with broken glass, but I just sounded tired. Laurie was silent. Staring toward the dark horizon, I felt my lips curve into a bemused smile. “I tell you about the imaginary friend who lives inside my head. I say that creatures from a dream are hurting me. Your response, instead of running in the opposite direction, is to whisk me away on the trip of a lifetime. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to figure out how your mind works, Laur, and I’ve been *in* it.”

He shrugged, his arm dangling off the center console. “What can I say? Like calls to like.”

I was about to respond when I felt Laurie’s fingertips brush against my stomach. I sucked in a breath, wondering when he’d moved. A moment later, Laurie undid the button on my jeans, and I held the steering wheel tight. “We shouldn’t…”

“Why? Because you’re fucking Collith?” he asked. I went still with surprise, and Laurie flicked his finger inside my jeans. I was still forming a response, or trying to, when he pulled his hand away and left my skin cold. “I agree that we shouldn’t take this further tonight, but it’s not because of anyone else. I simply require my sexual partners to be in the right frame of mind for our exploits, and having attended therapy myself

once or twice, I know from personal experience that immediately afterward is not an ideal time to make decisions."

"Or maybe it's the best time to make decisions," I said wistfully, aching where Laurie's fingers had touched and teased.

He smirked. "Now you just want me because you can't have me."

"There you go again, telling me how I feel."

"I know you feel hungry. I could hear your stomach from across the Atlantic."

Laurie leaned close. His tongue flicked out and teased the sensitive shell of my ear. Goosebumps raced over my skin, and they lingered when he expelled a faint breath along the curve of my neck.

"How do you feel now?" Laurie whispered.

Then I blinked, and he was gone.

"Frustrated," I said to the empty van. "I feel frustrated. Confused, too. Oh, and hungry, may as well add that to the list."

My skin was hot. I rolled down the window and reveled in the icy wind. I cranked the volume up and scream-sang the rest of the drive home.

When I parked next to the barn, I immediately spotted a splash of white on the ground—there was something resting in front of the door. My frown cleared when I remembered Laurie's comment about my stomach.

In the short time it had taken me to drive home, he had gotten a pound of food and left it here for me to find.

"Show off," I said, glancing around for any sign of silver eyes or the shimmer of magic. Only snow-covered trees stared back, the air adrift with the faint sounds of winter.

Smiling, I picked up the grease-stained bag and went inside.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The dreamscape was tinted in shades of pink when Oliver and I emerged from the cave.

We took a few steps into the open, both of us eager to put that eerie darkness behind us. No sound came out of it, but I swore I could still hear the shrieks and calls of Echidna's creatures. Shuddering, I quickened my pace, and Oliver matched it without complaint. Miles of prairie surrounded us, the needle-thin blades of grass bending in a gentle breeze.

Despite the serenity of our surroundings, Oliver and I didn't stop until the cave was out of sight. As we slowed, I inhaled the air deeply, enjoying the vastness of it. It smelled like salt, but I didn't see any telltale glitter in the distance. I raised my hand, shielding my eyes, and took closer stock of where we were.

Nothing, I thought. There was nothing but plains and open sky.

"Ocean is that way." Oliver nodded, and a gust of wind playfully mussed his hair. "We could hug the coastline for a while, then work our way inward. Any objections?"

I shook my head. "Sounds good to me."

Once again, we set off to venture into an unknown land.

As was becoming our custom, I told Oliver about all that had transpired since the last time we'd seen each other. The cherubim attack, the opera, my night with Viessa, the encounter with Collith afterward, Savannah's visit, my therapy session. And even though Oliver must've heard something in my voice every time I mentioned Collith or Laurie, there was no pain or jealousy in his countenance as he listened.

I fell silent and waited for any insights Oliver might have, but he didn't speak right away. Instead, he turned his head toward the horizon, his lips pursed in thought. Then a line appeared between his brows and he murmured, "What is that?"

I'd already turned, too. There was a black line on the horizon, moving fast in this direction. It took a long time to figure out what I was looking at, and even when I did, my brain struggled to accept the sight.

The black line was an enormous flock, more creatures from Mom's stories. They had a bird's body and a woman's head, along with huge wings and human-looking expressions, like malice and hatred.

Harpies.

"Shit," I cursed softly. We must've entered their territory, which meant there was a memory nearby. This battle was going to *hurt*—I could already imagine the talons on those things.

"Run," Oliver said.

We lurched into movement, our backpacks thumping hard against us. An instant later, I could hear them. The air ripped apart with sounds of human-like cries, as if dozens of women were being slaughtered high above.

As adrenaline coursed through me, my breathing hard and fast, I tried to remember what I knew about these things. Harpies were agents of punishment. From what I remembered, they abducted people, tortured them, and consumed souls. Though they possessed human-like intelligence, there would be no deals with these creatures, as there had been with Echidna—harpies were vicious, cruel, and violent.

The ones that came down on us were nothing like the wild, beautiful things I'd imagined. Their hair was ratty and wind-tossed. The fusion of human and bird was jarring, as if two puzzle pieces had been forced together rather than clicked into the correct place. Their feathers weren't white, or red, or anything mystical and lovely. They were like a seagull's. Gray.

One of them dove for me, her eyes so big and wide I could see them across the ever-shrinking distance between us. They were bright yellow, with black slits down the middle.

I ran faster, but it was futile. The winged monster snatched me up, ignoring my enraged screams. I longed for the gun I'd lost—Oliver hadn't been able to make me another one yet—and all I could do was wrench at

the harpy's hold and kick my legs like a child. I'd already discovered that, like all the rest, my powers didn't work on this creature. My magic went through it like an inconsequential puff of air, and then I was swinging over the frothing sea.

Feeling a chilly spray on my face, I did a wild scan for Oliver. There he was, dangling from the harpy's other foot. His eyes met mine at the exact moment the creature opened its talons and dropped us. A scream lodged in my throat, trapped by rushing air, and then a jarring impact rocked my bones.

We'd landed in a nest.

A nest, I noticed with a suddenly dry mouth, pushing myself up, that held three very large, very creepy-looking eggs. There were other nests around us, too far away to reach. Most of them, I was surprised to see, were occupied by male harpies. It seemed they'd been left behind to guard the young. It was probably pure happenstance that we'd been put in a nest without one.

I started to ask Oliver about the eggs, but his head was turned, looking toward the land we'd been snatched from. "I think the memory is on that beach," he said suddenly.

We'd just been snatched by a monster and left in a giant nest dangling over the sea. Normal people would be reeling, and the swiftness of Oliver's recovery said far too much about how many life and death situations we'd been in lately.

The same could be said for me, as well. I followed Oliver's gaze to the strip of land, pushing all my other thoughts away. He was right—the harpies had come when we'd started walking in that direction. They were guarding it, just like all the other creatures had been doing.

"Agreed," I said. "But how do we get there?"

That was the question of the hour. Oliver and I looked around again, hoping the answer would jump out. The cliff above our heads was a flat wall. There were ridges in the stone, bits of moss and roots, but nothing substantial enough to use or hold our weight. Wondering if there was anything beneath us, I climbed up the side of the nest, choosing every step carefully. My palms felt sweaty as I peered over the edge.

"There's another nest beneath us," I told Oliver. "No male in that one, either, but the eggs hatched. They look like adolescents."

Oliver glanced at the eggs on the other side of our nest, whole and still. Though he didn't voice any of his thoughts out loud, I saw them in the lines around his mouth. Were harpies carnivores? And did that extend to their newborns?

Regardless of the answers, there was nothing to do but wait. Wait for the harpies to come back or wait for a miracle to happen. We were stuck. I settled on the lip of the nest, positioning myself sideways so I could keep an eye on the eggs and watch the light fade.

"Still think my mind is a beautiful place?" I asked lightly, trying to muster a smile.

Oliver didn't answer straight away. He turned his face toward the ocean, too, and the departing sun bathed his skin in red. The wind stirred his hair, making strands catch the light like spun gold. At that moment, he looked like a stranger to me, and I wondered if I'd ever gotten to know the real Oliver… because I'd never allowed him to be anything more than the boy I had created.

Maybe this was Oliver, the man. A person who had fought past his impossible confines and forged new pieces of himself, finally becoming whole. Complete.

"Your mind has been home to me," Oliver said finally, holding out a feather he must've found in the nest. "I wouldn't exist without it. For that, I will always be thankful for this place."

The way he spoke made me frown. I took the feather and touched one of its soft edges. "Are you trying to say goodbye again? I thought we were past that."

"We're past the part where I pressure you and act like an asshole," Oliver said bluntly. "We're not past me wanting to go, though."

Hearing this, I would normally remind him that there was nowhere *to* go. But that was no longer true, was it? I knew what I was truly capable of now. I held the feather tightly and swallowed, unsure why the thought of telling Oliver had transformed my heart into a panicked bird. "Ollie…"

What if I was wrong? What if I couldn't repeat what I'd done with the tree and the beasts in the woods? What if Oliver and I made plans, real plans, and I broke his heart for the millionth time?

Fear won again.

The stars were coming out now, I noticed desperately. Seeing them brought another conversation to mind.

“It’s not, you know,” I said. Oliver looked at me and I clarified, “Love isn’t worth it. You probably don’t remember, because you were ridiculously drunk, but you asked me once. You were babbling about the stars, asking if they were worth loving. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what you really meant.”

I could tell from his expression that he didn’t remember—no surprise there. But now Oliver thought about what I’d said, completely sober. After a few seconds, he spoke with the same gentle firmness that he used to hold a paintbrush.

“I think it is. Worth it, I mean,” Oliver said.

I looked at him. His gaze was steady, his meaning clear. I didn’t want to demean Oliver’s sincerity or make him feel belittled, but I couldn’t stay silent. Not this time. “I’m literally the only human being you’ve ever met, much less dated,” I told him softly. “What you feel then might utterly pale in comparison to the love you feel for me.”

“You and I have been on a thousand dates. We’ve been to the carnival. We’ve gone stargazing. Swimming. I’ve taken you on picnics.”

“You’re missing the point, and none of that counts, Ollie.”

“Why not?” Oliver asked. There was nothing curt or confrontational about his demeanor. “Because there were no other people around?”

When he put it that way, I knew it wasn’t the reason I’d never thought of our nights as dates. But Oliver gave me a rueful smile, faint lines appearing at the corners of his eyes. “I’m not trying to change your mind about us. But… I’m valid. What I feel is valid. That’s all I wanted to say.”

I held his gaze and nodded to indicate that I’d heard him. That I’d *really* heard him. Maybe I belonged in a hospital, because it was the truth. By this point, it seemed impossible that Oliver wasn’t real. The world was full of magic. Out loud, though, all I said was, “I like it when you stand up for yourself.”

“Why don’t you try to get some rest? I’ll wake you when I think of a plan.” Oliver tugged at the end of my ponytail, but I saw right through him. He wanted me to fall asleep and wake up in the real world, where it was safe. While he was stuck here, alone, weaponless and vulnerable.

I gave Oliver a dead-eyed look, a clear indication of how I felt about *that*. “Nice try. I’m not…”

I looked down, and my words trailed off when I caught sight of something buried within the nest. It gleamed through the tangle of sticks,

grass, roots, and dirt. My eyebrows drew together. Tucking Oliver's feather away, I shifted so I was lower on the edge, making it easier to dig. In seconds, I wrapped my fingers around the object and pulled it out. I knew instantly what I'd found.

It was a talon.

I frowned at the deadly-looking point, thinking of ways I could use this newfound weapon. In my mind's eye, I saw the harpies in the nest below ours. An idea bloomed.

"Ollie," I said urgently, my gaze flying back to him.

But he was staring at the eggs behind me. I turned just in time to see a head poke through the layer of slime. Eyes, round and dark, landed on me. They lit up with something that was unmistakable. Something that had shone from my own eyes, I was sure, during those dark moments of invincibility, consumption, and power.

Hunger.

"Oh, *fuck*," I swore softly. Suddenly it was all-too clear why the harpies had left us here. Being eaten alive by their newborns was *not* the way I wanted to die. I whirled and climbed the edge of the nest again. "We need to go!"

"Go *where*?" Oliver demanded.

I halted at the very edge, and he stepped up beside me. "To the nest underneath us! *Hurry*."

"Wait! In case we die…" Grabbing my hand, Oliver's gaze dropped to my lips, then rose back up with obvious intent.

There were so many reasons why I should've turned away, and I wanted to defy them all. *Fuck it*. I grabbed the back of Oliver's neck and closed the space between us. His mouth opened to mine and his other hand fisted on my lower back.

It was a good kiss. Hard, urgent, and over too soon.

A screeching sound made us break apart. All the hatchlings had broken free of their eggs now. Two of them had started to move toward us, wobbling precariously on the tips of their wings and their stick-thin legs. They'd reach our perch in seconds.

Oliver was still holding my hand. He tugged at me, and I focused on him. There was no time to count or rethink it. In the next breath, we pushed off the edge like this was the cliff we'd spent our whole childhoods leaping from.

For a handful of wild, terrible moments, we plummeted in a freefall. It felt like we'd jumped out of a plane with no parachute. The distance was farther than I'd thought, and though I fought to remain vertical, the rushing air pushed me into a horizontal position. My hair streamed behind me and tears slid from the corners of my eyes.

Then I was hitting the nest, the air leaving my lungs in an agonizing *whoosh*. I realized that I'd landed on the same side that I had fallen on before. A moment later, I felt Oliver's hands wrap around my arms. The rough bottom of the nest scraped and poked at my legs as he hauled me backward. Away from the half-grown harpies staring at us just a few yards away.

Both male and female heads followed our movements.

Miraculously, I'd managed to hold onto the talon. I stood slowly, instinctively holding out one hand toward the harpies, as if they were feral dogs. In the other I adjusted my grip on the talon, making it easier to swipe and slash. It wouldn't come to that, I told myself.

"We're not going to hurt you," I said. "But we do need to borrow you for a bit."

One of them hissed, and I flinched. Great. This would officially go down as my worst idea ever. I was about to attempt talking to the hatchlings again when Oliver walked past me—he must've figured out what I was trying to do.

"Ollie," I growled.

He acted as if I hadn't spoken, striding right into the cluster of harpies without fear or hesitation. If they didn't kill him, I'd do it myself, I decided as I rushed forward. Oliver flung his hand out, palm-up. He didn't look at me, but his message was clear. *Stop. Trust me.*

"I am like you," he murmured, keeping his focus on the bristling creatures. The sound of his voice made the loud one cock its head. Oliver caught its gaze and nodded. "I am part of this world. We're made of the same magic."

I watched, spellbound, as he moved amongst them. Still offering the creatures calm reassurances, Oliver ran his fingertip along the edge of a wing. The harpy he'd pet made a purring sound. *They trust him now*, I thought.

A trust that extended to me, we discovered when I tried to approach the loud one again. I half-expected it to gouge me with a talon. The harpy just

kept its eyes on Oliver, who swung onto its sibling's back, a male with dirty hair and huge wings.

Steeling myself, worried I was about to be bucked off and fall right into the sea, I climbed onto the harpy I was still petting.

It didn't buck me off, but the creatures we'd chosen shrieked and fidgeted, unaccustomed to our weight. There was no time to let them adjust—the adults were nearly upon us now. Oliver directed his harpy with more gentle words, and since I didn't share a weird, mystical connection with mine, I pressed my heels into its feathered sides.

The monsters abandoned their nest without hesitation. Without knowing if they could fly, much less with riders. There was something enviable about their complete lack of fear, even if part of it was due to stupidity. For a handful of breath-stealing, stomach-churning seconds, we were all falling.

But the wind caught the creatures' wings, slowing our descent, pulling us upward. I started breathing again, and the four of us soared into the bloody horizon.

I felt what Gwyn must feel every time she sat atop her heavenly mount. Like my choices were limitless. Like I was truly free. And for an illogical moment, I wondered what it would be like to keep going. Fly into the distance and never think about the blood-filled life that kept taking everything from me.

The frantic cries of their parents ripped the sky in half.

I tore my gaze away from that burning skyline and searched for Oliver. A moment later, I found him already looking back, riding to the left and slightly behind. He inclined his head in a wordless question—once again, he'd already figured out what I planned to do. Or part of it, at least. The old Oliver would've tried to stop me or urge me to run, but this stranger simply waited for my answer.

Feeling warmer, suddenly, I just nodded. As one, we both signaled to our harpies. They turned willingly enough; they were too young to discern friend from foe.

We weren't their enemies, anyway—Oliver hadn't lied about that. I didn't hurt children, not even pretend ones that lived inside my head.

But these harpies' parents didn't know that.

I tugged gently at the feathers along the nape of the harpy's neck, and she understood, drawing up short in the air. Her wings flapped harder,

struggling to keep us in place against the wind currents.

The adults reeled back, their expressions tight with fury and caution. I raised my voice to breach the distance between us. “Let us reach the beach in peace, and cause us no more harm once we’re there! Swear a blood oath to this and we’ll let your children go free.”

I didn’t press the talon against my harpy’s skin. Instead, I held the makeshift weapon off to the side. My meaning was still clear—I could have it across her throat in a single swipe.

One of the adults came forward, and I knew she had to be my harpy’s mother. The truth was in how she held herself, her face twisted with viciousness. I stared back, chin held high, unafraid. I had faced real enemies, and this creature was nothing compared to them. She was only a piece of myself. She was beautiful, in her own way. She was terrifying, too, but it was obvious she’d do anything for the ones she loved.

I knew this, because the harpy had just sliced herself open with her own talons. Blood dripped down her stomach and fell into the sea. Her wings flapped harder to keep her suspended.

“We will let you reach the beach in peace, and cause you no more harm once you’re there,” the mother snarled, sounding anything but peaceful.

There was one flaw in my plan—to complete a blood oath, I needed to cut myself and mingle my blood with the harpy’s. That was absolutely *not* happening, so my only hope was that, like the giants, harpies weren’t very intelligent. Nodding goodbye to the flock of furious parents, I looked away and steered mine toward land. Oliver followed my lead. We finished our journey unhindered, followed only by wind and rousing moonlight.

The second our feet hit solid ground, the creatures we’d been riding launched off the sand and flew frantically in the direction of their parents, who still hovered in the air where we’d left them.

“Well, goodbye to you, too,” Oliver muttered. He stared after the bird hybrids, wearing an expression of genuine puzzlement. “I really thought I’d bonded with mine.”

It was such an Oliver thing to say. A smile touched my lips at the thought, startling me, and I reached up to touch it. My mood became pensive.

As promised, the harpies had left us alone, so I turned to start our search for the memory.

Night was nearly upon us now, and there wasn't a single star in the sky. Just roiling clouds and, beyond them, a deep and vast darkness. The air around us felt heavier, thicker. A storm was coming. My mom used to say that rain was a good omen, but something felt ominous about this one. Lightning flashed, making everything turn white, like the skin left behind by a newly-shedded snake.

"There's not much here," Oliver observed, turning to survey the length of the beach. I followed his gaze, and he was right—by all appearances, this place was just a lonely stretch of damp, rocky sand.

There was one part of it we couldn't see, though. I waited until Oliver looked at me and then nodded at a cluster of stones. They rested on the line where grass met sand. "Let's look behind that."

He nodded back. Less than a minute later, we rounded the first boulder, and I faltered at the sight of a lone campfire.

Whoever made it must've chosen this spot because the rock provided some protection against the wind. But the flames still quivered and flattened in equal turns, struggling to survive against the relentless gusts that tugged at my own hair and clothes.

Oliver touched my arm, and I gave him an inquiring look. He nodded at something behind me. I turned around quickly, raising the talon in an instinctive movement. When I registered who stood there, I sucked in a breath. My hand lowered, and the talon slipped from my dazed fingers.

Mom and Dad came down the grassy slope, walking toward the fire.

Their faces were hard and somber. Mom held me in her arms, just as she had been during the memory from the cave, even though I was too old to be carried like that. There was a… looseness to the way I rested against her.

Giving in to the impulse, I moved closer to study my younger self. A frown weighted the corners of my mouth. I jolted when I saw that the other Fortuna's eyes weren't completely closed. Thin, white slits were visible through her half-cracked lids. It looked, I thought with a chill, as though her eyeballs had rolled back into her head. I kept staring, trying to pinpoint why I was so bothered by the sight. After another beat, a burst of intuition went off inside me like fireworks.

The younger Fortuna wasn't sleeping. She'd been drugged.

Unease trickled through my veins, but there was no time to wonder why I'd been sedated—Mom's attention shifted, looking at something

inland. I followed her gaze.

More figures were coming down the hill, their clothes flapping like wings. I couldn't see their faces until they drew close enough to the fire, allowing its light to flicker over them. *Witches*, I thought. There were no outward traits to support this, like the fae with their pointed ears or vampires with their hot skin, but I knew.

Every one of them was female, and there were nine in total. The number was significant—it was a multiple of three, which appeared often throughout the bible. Three was a number of magic. Power. Possibilities. Doubtless it was why I'd undergone three trials to obtain my queenship.

The figures formed a circle around the fire, keeping me and my parents in the center. One of the witches was older than the rest, her gray hair cropped short, wrinkles gouging her cheeks like claw marks. It felt as though she should've been dressed in something dramatic, like a gossamer gown or a dark cloak. But all she wore were jeans and a button-up shirt.

I've been spending too much time with Laurie, I thought distantly.

"Are you sure?" the witch asked by way of greeting. Her voice was deeper than I'd expected it to be, almost throaty. It was a voice made for incantations.

The coven was silent and still as they waited for an answer. Waves crashed, far off shore, the roar of the sea reduced to white noise from where we stood. After a few seconds, my father—my strong, stern, courageous father—only nodded. As if he didn't trust himself to speak. Mom visibly tightened her grip on me, turning her face to rest it against my hair. I watched her inhale, long and deep, as if tonight was the last time she'd ever hold me. Ever smell my scent.

That was when I finally understood.

This was the binding. The night my parents had tied my power down with ropes and chains of magic. Mom was acting like this because the daughter she'd known *would* be forever changed.

Dread sprouted in my chest like bloated, poisonous flowers, and suddenly I didn't know if I wanted to see this. The thought made me take a small, hesitant step backward.

But I didn't look away.

"Place her within the circle, please," the gray-haired witch instructed.

Wasn't I already in the circle? No, I realized a moment later—there was a symbol drawn into the sand. It was similar to an amulet I'd seen the

Tongue put into his bowl on multiple occasions. Lowering my small-boned body as if it was made of crystal, Mom set me down on top of the symbol and pressed a kiss to my forehead. She backed away slowly, acting as if every step caused her physical pain.

Don't do this, I wanted to say. Some remnant of the child on the ground that still lingered inside me now.

But Mom couldn't hear me, and she'd made her choice a long time ago.

With a brisk sound, I refocused on the scene playing out. Next to my prone form was a basket, and from what little knowledge I'd gleaned of witches these past months, I knew it held her supplies. The ingredients needed to complete this spell.

Once my parents had moved back, the old witch knelt beside me. She rummaged through the basket, and when her hand emerged, it held a spool of red thread. She began to braid my hair, stopping every few seconds to add a piece of that thread to the separated strands. Her movements were gentle and slow. Unhurried.

Once she was finished with the braid, I watched the witch reach for her basket again and pull out a pair of silver scissors. Mom's body seemed to tense even further. The witch kept her focus on me, her expression calm. Handling my head carefully but firmly, she cut off the entire braid, leaving the rest of my hair short and ragged. My eyelids fluttered. It was the only indication that I was alive. Some part of me must've been aware, though. Seeing what was happening. Otherwise I wouldn't have been able to retain this memory.

The flames hissed and spit. Against the backdrop of the black sky and even blacker water, there was something stark and otherworldly about them. Still kneeling beside me, the witch held my braid over the fire. It was still smoking when she put it in a bowl, along with a handful of what appeared to be roots. Or maybe it was withered ivy.

Then she closed her eyes and began to chant.

The effect of those words was gradual. For a few seconds, nothing changed. My younger self didn't move, the fire snapped in the wind, and my parents looked on silently. The witch kept going, raising her voice. Not to speak over the wind, I thought, seeing the fierce concentration on her face. The true power of the incantation came from the witch herself. The

strength of her conviction. It was why the Doors within the faerie courts couldn't be used by any random person that stumbled upon them.

The child laying there suddenly arched her back, rising off the sand with a violent lurch. It was unnerving, watching myself writhe and scream from a pain I didn't remember. Didn't feel now.

My magic was reacting to hers. Trying to fight back.

Dad's grip on Mom looked too tight, as though he were holding her back. Her mouth was a thin line, her eyes dark with guilt. I didn't blame them. I wasn't angry about this choice they had made. I'd been a danger to them, to Damon, to everyone around me.

The proof was in this very memory. Watching the beach flicker with things that had lived inside seven-year-old Fortuna's head, winking in and out of existence like an old television trying to find a signal. Not just the dreams and memories that had frightened me, but the ones that held meaning, too.

Seeing this, I was suddenly grateful to my parents. They'd made an impossible decision and protected our family the best way they knew how.

And whatever that other witch had wanted from me, the binding only further protected me from it.

"Fortuna?"

The sound of Oliver's voice made me blink, and I saw the memory had come to an end—my parents were gone, along with younger Fortuna and all the witches. Only the fire remained.

I wondered how many times Oliver had said my name. Feeling hollow, as if someone had scraped out my thoughts and feelings with a dull spoon, I turned to look at him. He looked back patiently. I knew, somehow, that Oliver had been watching me instead of the memory.

What can I do? I imagined him saying. His mouth didn't form the words, but he didn't need to. I gave Oliver a weary smile. "Let's set up the tent. Maybe, if we get enough sleep tonight, you can see about those ol' lightsabers."

Oliver visibly repressed a sigh. "They're just not working, damn it. Something about the inner mechanisms. I'm not exactly an engineer or a scientist."

His brief tirade made me smile again, and this one was more genuine. Oliver and I left the beach behind and found ourselves in a hillside cornfield. We fell into an easy silence. Every once in a while, Oliver would

offer his hand, helping me up a tricky bit of slope or rock. I didn't need it, but I grasped his fingers each time, reveling in the warmth of his skin.

"I think I'm done," I said eventually, the wind threatening to snatch away my words. I paused and amended, "For a while, at least."

Oliver lent me his strength again as we picked our way over a narrow, trickling creek. "Done with what?"

"Looking for memories. Digging into the past. It hurts too much," I whispered. My tone made Oliver stop walking, his eyes bright with hesitation. His expression slowed my footsteps, and then I stopped, too. "Ollie? What is it?"

He shouldered his backpack in a nervous gesture. "There's—"

Oliver's voice cut short and the starry field vanished. I woke up in the loft, in my own bed, curled on my side. Hello was stretched out over my rib cage, purring like a motor. *She must've been what woke me*, I thought, petting her with a frown. I wondered what Oliver had been about to say. Guess it would have to wait until next time.

My gaze alighted upon my hand, which rested palm-up on the mattress. I was holding something, its weight so insubstantial that I probably wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't been facing it when I opened my eyes. When realization struck, the breath caught in my throat.

It was the feather Oliver had given me. I stared at it, waiting for the delicate strands to turn to dust like the photo booth pictures had.

They didn't.

The sound of Matthew's laughter drew me out of my ear-ringing shock.

I didn't know how long I'd been staring at the feather in my hand. Long enough for the sun to rise and my nephew to wake up, apparently. I sat up in bed, listening for other noises from the kitchen. Damon said something, and I heard Danny's voice, too. All of them were out there, and if I wasn't careful, they'd see the dreamscape in my eyes. Standing, I shoved every question I had about Oliver and the feather to a shadowed place inside me. I reached into the nightstand for one of my holy weapons, a habit I'd developed since coming home. After a moment's debate, I put

Dad’s pocketknife in the pocket of my pajama bottoms, and the feather burned a hole in the other as I opened my bedroom door.

Danny was at the stove, standing in the spot usually occupied by Emma. Her absence meant that she’d probably left for the day. Matthew sat in his high chair, and Damon was in a chair beside him. None of them had noticed me yet. My brother looked at Danny and asked, “When are you leaving for Michigan?”

The human turned with a spatula in his hand, opening his mouth to respond, but then he spotted me. He offered a soft, friendly smile. “Good morning. There’s fresh coffee in the pot.”

“I like you, Danny. I think we’ll keep you,” I commented, shuffling toward the coffee maker. Danny responded at the same moment a noise burst through the loft. It was a high-pitched, unending wail. I looked at Damon, whose bewildered expression matched mine. “Is that… Nym?”

“No idea,” he said, standing to cover Matthew’s ears.

Hello, who had been twining around the legs of the high chair, ran from the room at full speed. The fur along her back was raised.

As Nym’s keening continued, I rushed out of the kitchen. The faerie’s door was shut, but I opened it without hesitation. His name rose to my lips. The moment I took a step over the threshold, though, I could only let out a gasp.

Fear filled every corner of the room.

It radiated from a single source, one mind that was still guarded against my entry. The flavor on my tongue made me think of syrup. I stayed in the doorway, clutching the knob so tightly it hurt. All that delicious fear… beckoning to me like a buffet, crooning like a sirensong… “Nym? What’s going on?”

He was in the corner, his arms over his head. It was almost identical to how I’d found him on the night of Viessa’s coronation, only this time, Nym was rocking.

The instant I spoke, the noise coming from him stopped. He didn’t move or respond to my question. As I tried to think of what to do, I glanced around, noting that Nym had gotten his hands on a few more clocks since I’d brought the first one home. There was a small grandfather clock on the dresser, and two round alarm clocks on his nightstand.

All of them were ticking.

Footsteps sounded from the other end of the hallway. I glanced behind me, then did a double take. Finn stood there, on two legs, his dark hair damp from the shower. He wore jeans that looked new, along with a long-sleeved white shirt.

"You look great," I said, trying not to sound surprised. "What's the occasion? Not that there has to be one."

Finn shoved his sleeves up, revealing the hard tendons in his forearms. "I wanted to talk to—"

Without warning, his eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he crumpled to the floor like a pile of perilously-balanced rocks. Forgetting Nym, I cried Finn's name and dove for him, falling hard to my knees. The werewolf's entire body trembled. A line of spit slid out of one corner of his mouth and pooled on the tiles.

"I'll call an ambulance," I heard Danny say.

"No, don't," I snapped, struggling to push Finn onto his side. "No hospitals! We need Zara or Maria."

Danny started to ask something, but my brother touched his arm. His words were lost to me as I summoned every faerie I knew with access to a healer. *Laurie*. *Lyari*. Then, after only a breath of hesitation, *Collith*.

I was going through their names again when Danny knelt and added his strength to mine. We got Finn onto his side in an instant. He'd stopped seizing, but I kept him in that position, worried it would start again. The back of his shirt was drenched in sweat. It made the material transparent, and my eyes went to a bit of raised flesh that didn't belong. Hearing my swift intake of breath, Danny looked at me. I didn't answer. I couldn't.

There was a brand on Finn's back.

It wasn't the same symbol I bore, but the shape was similar. *Fende must've done it while we were at the Seelie Court*. The thought felt as if it belonged to someone else; I couldn't discern if I was numb or horrified. Possibly some strange combination of the two. Why hadn't Finn *said* anything? How had I missed it during the games, when he'd been naked and injured in the sand?

Feeling sick, I covered my mouth and turned away. It took me longer than I expected to put my emotions back into their cage—they kept evading me, running through my body with wild abandon. Guilt, horror, fear.

Gentle hands gripped my shoulders and a familiar scent surrounded me. A strange sound tore from my throat. I whirled, pressing my hands against Finn's chest to make sure he was real. I peered up into his face and said on a relieved exhale, "Holy *shit*, you scared me, wolf. What was that? Are you all right?"

His gaze burned into mine like a black fire. "His Majesty has finally recovered from your last encounter, Fortuna Sworn. He doesn't appreciate the delay in our plans."

Frowning, I stared at Finn for the length of two heartbeats—I could hear them in my ears. *One. Two.* On the third, I recoiled so violently that I almost fell. Danny caught me. I darted a glance at Damon and said, "Get Matt out of here. Now. And send a text to Emma and Cyrus. No one comes home until I call you and give the all-clear."

My brother didn't argue or question me. Holding Matthew in his arms, Damon walked calmly over to the door. He snatched up their coats and his car keys. Danny was close behind them, but I saw him glance back at us. *That's going to be a fun car ride for Damon*, I thought distantly, turning back to Finn.

I waited until the door closed. "Who are you?"

"Not important. All you need to know is that I speak for King Belanor." The intruder looked down at Finn's body. "Now, let's take a closer look at who I'm possessing."

Possessing. The word confirmed what I'd been afraid to let myself consider. There was a demon inside my friend, and I had no idea how to get it out. My voice was uneven as I said, "Finn isn't a part of this. If you don't release him right now, I'll—"

"I will gladly abandon this meatsuit," the demon cut in, rocking back on its heels. "I only ask for one thing in return."

I'd told myself, once, that I would never make another deal with a demon. But this was Finn. *Finn*. The werewolf who ached liked I ached, loved like I loved. The werewolf who pranced through snow and tore my enemies apart with his teeth. Damon was my brother by blood, and Finn was my brother by soul. For him, I would make a thousand deals.

"I'm listening," I said tonelessly.

The demon inclined its head. The gesture unnerved me, and I hid a flinch—it was Finn's face with none of his expressions, his mannerisms.

“There’s a witch outside,” it said. “Allow her to finish the ritual Belanor started with that brand, and you’ll have your pet back, safe and sound.”

I should’ve been expecting it. After all, the spell was all Belanor cared about. He’d gone so far as to put a contingency plan in place, not knowing if he’d ever need to use the brand on Finn, but doing it anyway. *This* was why Belanor had walked away on the night of the opera, I realized, clenching my hands into fists. He’d hoped to complete his spell then, no muss, no fuss. Demonic possession was a last resort, which I had pushed Belanor to by repeatedly thwarting him.

The demon waited for my response, and its silence said more than the words coming out of its mouth. With faeries and demons, I’d learned, the trick to their games was to ask oneself, *What are you not telling me?* They liked to use diversions or create nets from their honeyed remarks.

So I gave the demon a hard stare and asked the question. *What are you not telling me?*

For once, the answer was obvious. Although Belanor had never specified what my fate would be after the spell’s completion, I’d always suspected I wouldn’t have one. Powerful magic usually required sacrifice.

It meant that agreeing to the demon’s proposal would result in my death. That’s what it was withholding from me, I thought, and I suppressed an urge to laugh. If this demon truly believed I hadn’t put it together by now—that it had never occurred to me I might die from Belanor’s black magic—it was severely underestimating me. Maybe I could use that.

Before I could say anything, though, Laurie and Collith materialized.

“I’m afraid your witch has a broken neck,” Laurie said casually, examining his nails. His rings glittered. “We were stopping by to speak with our queen, and you can imagine my surprise when I discovered an intruder on the grounds. She probably won’t be doing any rituals tonight. Or ever, really.”

Tucking its hands behind its back, the demon shrugged. The confident stance was at odds with the drool still clinging to Finn’s chin. “We’ll just send another one,” it said. “Fortuna Sworn, what is your answer?”

“Her answer is no,” Collith said softly.

I shot a glare at him. “I can speak for myself, thanks.”

“Of course you can, but there’s nothing wrong with accepting help from friends, Fortuna,” Laurie interjected. He refocused on the demon, one

side of his mouth tilting up into a crooked smile. “Go ahead and send a new witch. I shall make a game of finding creative ways to kill each one.”

The demon opened its mouth to reply, but then its body jerked. The movements didn’t look like a seizure this time, but it was as if someone was striking at the demon from inside. It jerked twice more before collapsing.

Blurting Finn’s name, I started to rush over to him, but Collith seized my arm and held me back. I almost wrenched free when he said, his voice low in my ear, “Look at his hands, Fortuna. He could rip you open in a heartbeat.”

He was right. My gaze fell onto Finn’s fingers, where his claws had split skin and nail, poking out from the torn flesh like small blades. “We need to move him,” I said shakily. “Oh, and Nym, I should make sure he’s okay. I should text Emma and Cyrus, too. My phone, where is my phone —”

“They already know, Fortuna,” Laurie said. Hearing his soft tone reached me through the dull roar of fear. It was the same voice he had used during our conversation outside the garage, soft snow falling all around. *You are beautiful, Fortuna Sworn*. My vision cleared, and I looked up at Laurie, listening to my own heartbeat slow. He waited until I was calmer, and then he asked, “Where should we move him?”

I felt Collith watching the two of us, and after a moment, I blinked and averted my gaze. “Cyrus has a basement. It’s all concrete, and there’s only one way in and out.”

I started toward Finn. Laurie put a hand on my waist, stopping me. “Best let someone with a supernatural healing ability do this part,” he advised.

“We finally agree on something,” Collith said, moving to grasp Finn’s shoulders. He raised his head and looked at Laurie, brackets of tension appearing on either side of his mouth. “I can carry his legs, if you’d rather be on this side,” he added pointedly.

Laurie’s eyes flicked down to his sweater. “This is cashmere,” he began.

“Laurelis, if you don’t get over here and help me, I will finish what we started the day you cut my face open.”

At that moment, Lyari appeared on the other side of Finn, and she spoke before Laurie could. “I went to the loft first, because that’s where I

was summoned," my Right Hand said. She gave the males a scathing look. "Then I heard the sound of two squabbling faerie kings, and I followed that. I knew wherever I found them, I would find you, Your Majesty."

She nodded at me before turning back to Collith. They lifted Finn in unison, making it look effortless. I had enough sense left to think of my phone, and that I might need it if something else happened. I darted into my room to get it. Once I returned, the five of us—*four of us*, I corrected silently, noting that Laurie had sifted again—made our way down the stairwell, through the barn, across the yard, and into Cyrus's house. Stanley immediately ran to greet us, his nails clicking on the hardwood. He shoved his nose against our legs as I led everyone to the basement door and flipped the light switch. When he got to Finn, pressing his wet nose against the werewolf's hand, he let out a long whine and slinked away. I made a mental note to shower him with treats.

A few seconds later, we all stood in the dim, dry space, looking down at Finn's prone form. He rested on a sleeping bag I'd thrown onto the ground. Laurie blinked back into sight on the other side of us. He followed a stream of sunlight to the small window over the dryer. It was so small that only someone Matthew's size would fit through it.

"There must be a way to help him," I said quietly, staring at Finn's pain-twisted face. There were beads of sweat on his forehead and his eyes moved beneath the lids.

Laurie turned away from the window. His voice was distracted as he asked, "Why on earth would we want to help Belanor?"

"She means," Collith growled, "a way to help the wolf."

"Oh, right." Laurie fell silent for a beat. "Is that important?"

"Laurelis." Though Collith didn't move, his voice sounded like he should've been pinching the bridge of his nose in a gesture of long-suffering.

"Well, how important is the werewolf, really? We could just kill the poor thing and put him out of his—"

"If you finish that sentence, I will gut you," I said calmly.

Laurie heaved a sigh, managing to look annoyed and resigned at the same time. "Fine. Exorcism it is, then. Between the three of us, there must be a witch who owes a favor," he said.

"An exorcism?" I repeated. "Will that be—"

Finn lurched upright, and I was so startled that I took a step back. His glowing eyes latched on me. In an instant, Lyari was holding him down, her mouth set in a grim slash. Collith moved in a blur and pinned Finn's arms. The werewolf snapped his teeth in my direction, his jaw slightly jutted and unnatural.

Watching him, it felt like a dozen cracks had run through my heart. In fighting the demon, Finn was losing control of the wolf. We needed to restrain him until I knew how to get that parasite out.

"Handcuffs," I blurted. "Finn owns a pair of handcuffs. They're made of iron and regularly soaked in holy water. He said every werewolf has them, just in case."

"Just in case *what*?" Lyari snapped. Spittle flew from Finn's mouth.

"I don't know, maybe in case one of them gets possessed by a demon or something!" I snarled.

Collith sifted halfway through my sentence. Seeing its chance, a surge of strength came over the demon. Bellowing, it wrenched free of Lyari's hold. I threw all of my weight down on Finn's body, shouting over my shoulder, "Laurie? A little help?"

Laurie strode forward. In a fluid, blurred movement, he swung his leg up and kicked Finn squarely in the head with the heel of his shoe. I stared, open-mouthed, as the werewolf dropped to the floor in an undignified heap. "What the hell was that?" I managed.

He straightened his sweater. "You asked for my help. I helped."

"I swear to God, I'm going to murder you when all this is over," I muttered, bending to check Finn's head. What if the demon had affected his ability to heal?

Laurie opened his mouth, then seemed to reconsider whatever he'd been about to say. Collith rematerialized a moment later, chains clinking in his hands. Iron cuffs dangled at the ends, and something inside me recoiled at the thought of putting them on Finn—he still bore scars from the chains he'd been forced to wear at the Unseelie Court.

Without a word, Lyari took them from Collith and did it herself. Her expression was impossible to read, but I knew she'd made the decision so I wouldn't have to. Gratitude pricked my heart like the smallest of needles. When Lyari was done, and Finn's spine was bowed from the loops around his wrists and ankles, she secured them into place with the open padlock that had been dangling from one of the links.

Seeing him like that was almost my undoing. *Okay*, I thought, clinging to purpose like I always did. It was time to make a plan. Making a plan would keep the terror at bay. I cleared my throat and said, “Laurie, you mentioned that we’d need a witch to perform an exorcism. What about Betty? You called her your favorite.”

He was suddenly absorbed in the length of his sleeve. “Betty may not be speaking to me right now.”

Any other day, I would’ve been curious. Today, all that mattered was finding a witch. Darting another glance toward Finn, I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone.

“I can try contacting Mercy again, but she’s ignored all my texts and calls since I got back from the Seelie Court,” I said flatly. I unlocked the screen and it brightened. My eyes went to the bars in the corner. “I don’t have a signal down here. I’ll be right back.”

I didn’t look at any of them as I turned and headed for the stairs. Lyari said something behind me, her voice too low to make out. Collith replied, equally quiet. I was too worried about Finn to be curious.

Back on the main floor, I found Mercy’s name in my contact list and pressed CALL. This time, it only rang once before the witch’s voice filled my ear. “Savannah will help you,” she said by way of greeting.

My eyebrows shot up. “What? No offense, but I think I must’ve misheard you. You want me to ask an unstable necromancer for help?”

“That unstable necromancer is one of the most powerful witches alive, and for whatever reason, she is eager to prove herself to you and that spineless brother of yours. She also happens to be a few miles away, while I myself am in Sweden, nowhere near a Door. Until next time, Queen Fortuna.”

Her tone made it clear the conversation was over. I said goodbye through my teeth, fighting the urge to fling my phone at the wall. Once we’d hung up, I texted Damon, Emma, and Cyrus to update them on what was happening. I didn’t want anyone to come back while there was a demon in the basement.

I’d just turned to go back down when someone knocked on the front door. I paused, torn between ignoring it and caution. What if the visitor was an agent of Belanor, or the Rat King, or one of the many other people I had mocked and defied? Swearing under my breath, I pulled the knife out of my pocket and hurried through the living room. I shifted my body out

of sight before reaching for the knob—another habit I'd developed since my return.

Once again, I opened a door to find Savannah Simonson on the other side.

I lowered the knife and swallowed another curse. She must've seen the instant denial in my eyes, because the necromancer didn't give me a chance to speak.

"My aunt got a message to me last night," Savannah said quickly. Snowflakes clung to her eyelashes and the black cloak she wore. "Mercy had a dream, and she said you would need me. I left Court as soon as the sun rose. Whatever is happening, I can help. The Tongue has been teaching me how to control my power. I can touch my magic again, without raising anything."

Hearing this, I hesitated. If what she said was true, Savannah really could perform an exorcism on Finn. The fact she'd left the Unseelie Court also bore some significance. *I don't go to the surface*, she told me once. I'd tasted her dread that night. Savannah had faced one of her greatest fears to come in our hour of need.

If it weren't for her, Fred would still be alive. But now she could be the reason that Finn survived.

A battle waged within me. I wished I could leave the decision to Damon. If I did this—if I trusted Savannah and let her help us—it would be like opening a door. Just a crack, maybe, but that would be enough for her. What if she took Matthew? What if she lost control of her magic and endangered our family?

This is Finn, I thought again. My decision had been made the second I opened this door and saw it was Savannah standing there.

"Your aunt is kind of infuriating," I said at last, sounding as defeated as I felt.

Savannah nodded sympathetically, her auburn hair glinting in the sunlight that reached over the treetops. "Mercy has that effect on people," she told me. "She's flaky, too. When I was growing up, I was a little obsessed with her. I thought she was so independent and mysterious."

Both of us fell silent, and the air swelled with uncertainty. Though I'd all but accepted Savannah's offer, I hadn't moved from the doorway. Her eyes lowered to note the pocketknife in my hand. *Might as well get this*

over with, I thought, putting the knife back in my pocket. I'd have to let her in eventually.

Ignoring how my instincts shrieked, everything in me still resistant to the idea of trusting Savannah again, I opened the door wider and stood aside in a wordless invitation. "Can you really help him?"

"I can try. Is there a basement in this house?"

She stepped over the threshold, and I closed the door behind her. "Yes, that's where we're keeping Finn. The demon, I mean. Why?"

The necromancer gestured that I should lead the way, displaying an assertiveness I hadn't seen in a long time. I obeyed without hesitation, afraid that if I made one of my usual snarky comments, that lovely flame inside her would snuff out. I strode to the door that led downstairs, and Savannah's voice floated over my shoulder. "Magic is stronger the closer we are to natural elements. Dirt, trees, that sort of thing."

"Watch your head," I muttered. She followed me down the narrow, wooden stairs.

Collith, Laurie, and Lyari came into view first, and I could tell instantly from their postures that something was wrong. When I reached the bottom step, I saw why—the demon had regained consciousness. It sat very still as we entered the space, those black eyes cataloging our every move.

Savannah halted, and I glanced over at her. She'd gone pale. Her attention was glued to the iron handcuffs.

"Those won't hold it," she whispered, shaking her head. Her cloak flared as she darted over to a metal shelf—it was where Cyrus stored items that didn't fit in the garage. One of those items was a battered-looking box of chalk. Savannah plucked two pieces out, her hands trembling. But there wasn't any unsteadiness in her voice as she ordered, "Quickly, go on that side, draw exactly what I do. *Hurry*."

The demon must've sensed it was in danger, because it began to yank at the chains, snarling. It writhed on its belly like a worm. The three faeries in the room stood with weapons drawn, their expressions making it clear they wouldn't hesitate to act, even if it meant hurting Finn. Desperate to stop that from happening, I rushed to follow Savannah's instructions. She chanted in the angelic tongue, words I'd never heard or read, her voice as loud and certain as a clanging bell.

She kept chanting once the circle was drawn. *The spell isn't complete,* I thought. Savannah needed more time. I hurried to stand in front of the demon and hold its attention.

"Who is your master?" I spat. "Who do you and Belanor serve?"

The demon didn't answer. Instead, Finn's mouth stretched… downward, somehow. It gave his face alien, unnatural proportions. I watched with dim horror as his lips gaped, revealing a swirling darkness inside him.

The scream that came out of him was like nothing I'd ever heard before. Savannah and I cried out as we both covered our ears, collapsing to our knees. But our chalk boundary worked—the iron handcuffs came apart like taffy, and when the demon launched itself at us, it was as though it slammed into an invisible wall.

The creature's enraged scream went on and on. A powerful, inexplicable wind rushed through the room. Savannah shouted in Enochian again, her hair and her cloak flying, making her look like some ancient witch from a story. Lyari, Laurie, and Collith all gathered around me, forming a barrier with their bodies that blocked Savannah and the demon from my sight. I tried to push between them, wanting to go to Finn.

An instant later, the window shattered and glass sprinkled over the concrete.

Then the lights went out.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

An entire day passed. Then, two. I never went to sleep, and the only time I left Finn's side was to see to my basic needs.

After the demon had taken ownership of Finn's body and cast us into darkness, Savannah's magic took hold, and the creature passed out again. The unnatural wind stopped and that terrible scream ended. My chest heaved, and I stared at Finn's lax face, relieved to see it had returned to normal proportions. Savannah's spell, whatever it was, had worked—a sleeping spell, I'd learn later.

We didn't let the demon regain consciousness.

Over the following days, the rest of my family stayed at Danny's. Their absence didn't mean I was alone, though. Savannah returned every three hours with a fresh supply of monkshood, an herb more commonly known as wolfsbane. She used it to keep Finn's body weak and buy us time. If he were human, the herb probably would have stayed in his body for twice as long, but Finn burned through it at a preternatural rate, which was why we replaced the handcuffs he'd broken as a precaution. Savannah also brought a sedative of the human variety, courtesy of Zara, who sent me her regards. I mentally added it to the debt I already owed her.

Whenever she wasn't at the house, Savannah spent every spare moment looking for an exorcism spell. They were less common than human media depicted, and she had never learned how to do one, she told us once the demon was subdued again. Mercy, of course, wasn't answering her phone.

Lyari, too, made constant appearances. She brought care packages from Emma. She forced me to stand and go through swordplay exercises

with her. She brought a deck of cards and taught me a game the Guardians played during their dungeon shifts. We set up two camping chairs that day, which became the chair I practically lived in as I watched over Finn.

If Collith and Laurie ever came back, I didn't see them. Every once in a while, though, I thought I caught a scent that made me think of a garden in summertime. Other times, the scent was a crisp spring breeze. Once, I turned from the washer, where I'd been putting in a new load, and found a black rose resting on a pile of folded clothes.

They were looking for exorcism spells. All of them. Lyari never said a word, but I knew.

On the afternoon of the third day, silence pressed down on me like a weight. Wind pushed against the cardboard I'd taped over the broken window. Back in the camping chair, I picked up my phone for the millionth time and unlocked the screen. Instead of clicking on the messages icon—everyone continued to send updates, and I'd been checking the group text constantly, which we started the day I came home—I opened a music app.

Before I could do anything else, a video from Damon appeared in the group chat. I pressed the small triangle, and Matthew's face filled the screen. His apple-red cheeks wrinkled as he beamed. "Tell Auntie 'Tuna you miss her," Damon's voice encouraged.

Matthew pulled at the corner of his mouth with one finger. "Miss you, Tuna Fish!"

A bubble of spit popped, startling him. Then Matthew giggled, and Damon made a playful sound of dismay. My shoulders shook with silent laughter. It was the first time I'd laughed in days, but then my attention flicked to Finn, and the lightness in my chest quickly sank down again. The silence rushed back. Desperate to fill it, I reopened the music app.

I was browsing playlists when Finn stirred and mumbled something. It sounded like my name. I scrambled over to him, flattening against the floor so our faces were at the same level. I'd taken to wearing the Glock in a holster on my hip, and I reached down to remove it, allowing me to stay close to Finn. I still clutched my phone in the other hand as I whispered, "Finn? Can you hear me?"

Shit, I thought. What if he'd already burned through the sedatives?

The werewolf opened bloodshot eyes, and when he looked at me, I knew it was really him. Bright relief rushed through me, the edges of it

tinged with shadow. My Finn was sad, and that sadness was in everything he did. I saw it now, peering out at me from the depths of his gaze. It was a pain no demon could replicate.

Finn still hadn't answered me, and I wondered if he was fighting the creature's hold on him. A distraction was all I could offer. I hid a flash of self-loathing at the thought. Right now, Finn was all that mattered.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" I asked him now, pressing my fingers at the very edge of the chalk. "The other morning. You started to say that you wanted to talk to me."

Finn nodded, his cheek scraping against the concrete. He ignored the plate of food resting nearby. "Dragonfire," he rasped. "The dragon… he said you asked him to…"

It only took me a moment to figure out what he was trying to say—Finn was asking about the day I'd ended up in the hospital. We hadn't talked about it, I realized as I shifted on the floor, trying to hide my distress. In all the time that had passed since the terrible day I'd made my unforgivable request to Cyrus, Finn and I had never actually acknowledged it. We'd started to, but I'd let my pain and fear get in the way.

I swallowed the shame rising up my throat. "That was wrong of me. In more ways than one," I told him.

Finn visibly struggled for a moment. Then he managed to say, the words guttural and halting, "Promise me. Promise you won't…"

"I promise," I said. I didn't hesitate, despite the bloody lessons I'd learned these past few months. Actions and choices had consequences, even ones like this. Promises were heavy things, and few people were truly prepared to carry the weight of them. Myself included.

But my wolf had been trying to protect me for so long, and at every turn, I'd done the opposite of what a pack member should. I swallowed and added, "No more deals with demons, no more dragonfire. No more trouble in general. From now on, I'll behave."

Finn's eyes softened. "Don't make promises you can't keep. You like getting into trouble, I think."

It took me a moment to realize that he'd actually made a joke. It was weak, but a joke nonetheless. A smile bloomed across my face. I put my hand next to his, our pinkies almost touching. My mind raced to think of a new topic. Something that would bring him hope and combat the darkness inside.

“We’ve never talked about it, you know,” I ventured gently. “About what you want to do after this, I mean. Damon is going back to school and Emma is thinking about opening a dispensary, God help us all. But what about you, Finn? What are your dreams?”

“You,” he whispered, his eyes closing. “Just you.”

I smiled and dared to touch his cheek with the tip of my finger. Finn didn’t move. “You can’t follow me around for the rest of your life.”

“Why not?” he asked, still not looking at me.

I drew my hand back over the chalk boundary. “Because you deserve more, silly wolf.”

“I know what I deserve.” Finn’s voice sounded less pained now. Less faint. He opened his eyes, and they were sharper than before. Unease crept through my veins, but I still wasn’t prepared when he said, “I want to make the Blood Vow.”

I didn’t pretend to misunderstand. The thought of binding someone else to me, even Finn, created a knot of anxiety in my stomach. “It doesn’t mean anything, Finn,” I insisted. “What Gil and I share was a result of desperation and fear. I was just trying to stop a newborn vampire from killing—”

His eyes turned black again, and a jolt of terror cut me short. I stared at him. Finn’s body quaked, and then his eyes were back to brown. “Can’t fight it much longer,” he growled.

At some point, I’d risen to my knees. When Finn started shaking again, I became frantic, my hands hovering near the chalk boundary. Words spilled out of me, mindless. “Let’s make a deal, okay? Hey, are you listening to me? I’ll exchange the Blood Vow with you if you keep fighting that thing. Savannah is looking for a way to get it out, so we just need to buy her some time.”

“Kill me,” Finn gasped, wrenching at the chains. “Kill me before I hurt you, Fortuna!”

The *thud-thud-thud* of footsteps burst through the stillness. A moment later, Savannah rushed past, crossing the chalk line at a sprint. She released a string of Enochian and slammed her knee down onto Finn. She crushed a fistful of wolfsbane into his snapping mouth, her wiry arms standing on end as he writhed. Once the herb practically covered the entire lower half of Finn’s face, Savannah threw herself backward.

“Sorry I’m late,” she panted. “I had to go farther for the monkshood this time. Good news is, I got a bigger haul, so it should buy us another day.”

I barely heard her; my eyes were glued to Finn. Fury ripped through me when he whimpered. Not at Savannah, but the demon causing so much torment. My hands clenched into helpless fists. I couldn’t do anything but watch as my friend twisted and flailed, his spine bending at unnatural angles.

After a few more agonizing seconds, Finn’s body slackened. I settled just outside of the circle again, and I could taste the bitter tang of tears on my tongue. I glared at Finn’s tense, slumbering face as if I could see the creature inside him.

“Are you listening to me, you pathetic worm?” I said the words in a whisper, but my voice shook with rage. “You will pay for this. You will *pay* for this.”

“Did I come at a bad time?”

I didn’t react at the sound of Laurie’s voice. “Not now,” I said flatly.

“I want to show you something,” he said above me, ignoring this. “Why don’t you take a break?”

Still, I didn’t move or take my eyes off Finn. I could see Savannah hovering near us. “I’m not leaving him, Laurie.”

“Zara always uses the good stuff—your werewolf won’t wake for hours yet.”

“I’ll stay with Finn, Your Majesty,” Lyari interjected.

When had she gotten here? I pushed myself up and turned in a burst of impatience, ready to argue. Lyari looked back at me with that same steadiness she always seemed to emanate, and the words in my throat faded. We both knew her word was as good as steel. Some of the tension left me, and I thought about how I’d hardly left this basement these past three days. Slowly, I tore my gaze from Lyari and refocused on the Seelie Prince, who was resplendent as ever in a suit of blue velvet. I gave him a barely perceptible nod.

His sharp eyes didn’t miss a thing. In an instant, he extended his hand toward me in a wordless urge. *Let’s leave this place.*

As I put my fingertips in the center of his palm, I thought of the firelit room we’d once shared. I shoved the memory back into the darkness, furious with myself for thinking of anything other than Finn, even for a

second. He was going through this because of me. If he hadn't met me, or become part of my life, Belanor never would've given my werewolf a second glance.

Walking past Lyari and Savannah, Laurie and I went upstairs. I was surprised when he didn't sift. In the entryway, Laurie watched me pull on my coat and boots. Normally, I would find his lack of commentary unnerving. But not today. Not with what was happening in the basement below us.

Once I was ready, Laurie opened the door and moved aside. My shoulder brushed against his chest as I stepped into the cold. The sky overhead was a deep blue. The waning sunlight, as it burned through the spaces between trees, had the look of a hungry flame. All oranges, reds, and yellows. I shoved my hands into my pockets and started toward the path I'd once taken multiple times a day.

Laurie didn't try to fill the silence. We walked beside each other, together and apart, and the only sounds were my footsteps over sheets of ice and stretches of hardened snow. The only sign of life we encountered was a small cabin, its edges alight with small lights.

It was almost Christmas, I remembered with a rush of dismay. I'd been so distracted that I hadn't even begun thinking about presents, and this year there were a lot more people to shop for. *Shit*. What the hell was I going to get *Gil*? A year's worth of hair gel, maybe?

"Any chance you'd like to go shopping with me, once all this is over?" I asked impulsively, stepping over a fallen tree covered in snow.

Laurie faltered. It was subtle, and he recovered swifter than my eyes could track, but I saw it.

"Are you asking me out on a date, Fortuna Sworn?" the faerie prince asked, looking over his shoulder with a grin.

The breezy way he phrased the question made it easy to back out. He was giving me a chance to reestablish the boundary of friendship between us. Somehow, in spite of the toe-curling sex we'd shared, that boundary had survived. It wasn't too late to step back and face him from the other side.

I knew Laurelis Dondarte wanted me—I wouldn't do us both the disservice of pretending otherwise, not anymore. But I was barely out of my early twenties. I'd just had my heart broken a few weeks ago. One of my best friends was currently being kept in a basement because he was

possessed by a demon. I wasn't ready to fully commit myself to another person, not when I was still figuring out how to be one myself.

"No," I said finally, smiling back. "But I don't hate your company. You might actually make a panicked, last-minute search for Christmas gifts fun."

Laurie kept walking, the corner of his mouth tilted upward. But I couldn't see enough of his face to discern whether he was hurt. "Of course I'll go shopping with you," he replied without turning. "I would never turn down an opportunity to improve someone else's wardrobe. Your brother and Sir Nym are in desperate need of my services."

My lips twisted in thought. "Let me get this straight," I said after a moment. "Me, Damon, and Nym all need your help, but Emma hasn't earned a spot on the list?"

"Mrs. Miller," Laurie declared, "is perfect just the way she is."

I laughed. The sound echoed around us, and Laurie smiled at me, his eyes the palest of blues in the twilight.

It felt like hours later when we reached the Unseelie Court. Laurie entered the darkness first, probably as a precaution, but no one bothered us in the tunnel. We emerged into another forest, this one less frozen. The trees were still bare, though, and our breaths were visible with every exhale.

The easiness between us had faded—neither of us fully trusted Viessa, I thought—as we'd been using the Door. Now tension crackled around us like electricity. Still, Laurie moved with the certainty of someone who'd been here many times before. He led me toward our mysterious destination, maintaining his strange silence the entire way. I would've asked where we were if I thought I'd get an answer.

By the time Laurie stopped, the world was more shadow than light. We stood at the very edge of the wood, and the sight of what existed beyond it made my anxiety give way to awe. Before us, gently sloping hills lapped toward the horizon, looking like the strangest of seas. Faint outlines of mountains stood just below the setting sun.

Laurie propped himself against a tree, one heel pressing to the bark while his other braced his weight on the ground. He crossed his arms and tilted his head, his expression relaxed and contemplative. I stood beside him, facing the horizon. My spine was stiff. What if Finn woke up while I was gone? What if he used my absence to do something stupid?

We should go back. I turned my head to say the thought out loud.

"Do you want to know a secret?" Laurie asked, keeping his gaze on those rolling hills. "How I manage to smile and make my grand jokes, even when the world is crumbling around us?"

I didn't need to think about it. "Yes. Desperately."

His tone became distant, as if he were seeing a slideshow of memories where the sun should be. "I view life like a story," Laurie said. "A story in which I am the main character, and every terrible thing that happens is just a chapter in it. Stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end, so I always remind myself that I am somewhere in the middle."

"You say that as if every story has a happy ending," I said softly.

"True. But the alternative is far too serious for someone like me. I'm perfectly content clinging to my childish beliefs." He smiled at me again, but this smile said there was far more to Laurelis Dondarte than I'd ever realized. That he'd lived an entire life before meeting me, and there were many parts of it he kept locked away.

"Why isn't Betty speaking to you?" I asked abruptly. I wasn't sure why I chose that moment to ask, or why the question popped into my head at all. Maybe it was the only topic change I could think of.

"Beg pardon?" Laurie said, giving me an innocent blink. I responded with a look that said, *You heard me.* Laurie sighed and turned his silver head back toward the sunset. "She grew tired of watching me fall in love with other people. I knew she loved me, and I did nothing to assuage her of that during our years together. Her love was useful to me, and use has always been what matters most."

"Did your mother teach you that?" I asked, trying to hide the disdain I felt for Mab.

I knew I hadn't been successful when Laurie's mouth twitched. "She liked you, you know. She didn't make it obvious, of course, but Mother never would've gone through the trouble of throwing that party if she'd found you annoying."

I opened my mouth to respond, but Laurie's gaze shifted. His eyes flicked back to mine and he put a finger to his lips, then nodded at something behind me. I frowned, squinting as if that would help me see better. There was a rumbling in the distance. Thunder, maybe? But there were no clouds in the sky…

Then I spotted movement on the horizon. A long row of figures appeared, splashes of color in a world faded by winter. When I realized what I was looking at, I clutched the bark of the tree closest to me. Tendrils of hair blew into my face, but I didn't brush them away.

Then they were thundering past. Clumps of earth flew from beneath their hooves. There was no need for Laurie to stress the importance of silence; it was obvious that these were wild creatures. They looked exactly like how I used to imagine the Mares of Diomedes, the man-eating horses from my mother's grisly stories. Huge. Colorful. Strong. Their manes fluttered like sails and every single beast looked toward the horizon, as if nothing else existed for them.

My eyes met those of an enormous stallion, both in stature and in presence. Even in that briefest of moments, I saw the intelligence burning in its dark eyes. The smolder of arrogance and the brightness of something so wild, so untamable, that it may as well have been made of wind. And flew like wind it did, thundering past my hiding spot with Laurie, hundreds more following him into the pale horizon. I kept my eyes on it, long after the herd was gone, envious of such speed and grace.

"They were beautiful," I murmured. At that moment, the world felt like a church, a sacred place that should be treaded through quietly. I turned back to the faerie prince standing near me.

"There's a story about this herd." Laurie's hair stirred in a cold burst of wind. "My mother told me they used to be Fallen. Shapeshifters. They were so content as they were they forgot to change back."

I couldn't decide if I found the story tragic or happy—perhaps a little bit of both, like all good stories. Another gust of wind hit us, then, and my nostrils flared in a deep, exalted inhale. My mind was the clearest it had been in days, and the bone-deep weariness had become more bearable.

I opened my eyes and stared up at Laurie, knowing he'd brought me out here for this feeling. This clarity. My heart sank as I recognized a flutter in my belly. It was the same flutter I'd gotten around Collith, especially toward the end of our short-lived romance.

"Please," I whispered. "Don't do this."

Laurie's brow lowered, and his eyes snapped to mine. "Do what?"

"Make me fall in love with you." As soon as I said the words, I wanted to take them back. Saying the truth out loud made it even more terrifying.

In an attempt to fight the pull between us, I forced a smile and added, “I don’t think I’d survive it.”

Laurie’s gaze shone with frozen heat. There was no trace of humor in his countenance. “To be clear, I fully intend to do exactly that,” he informed me. “But don’t mistake me for Collith, my queen.”

My confusion was genuine, and I shook my head. “I don’t know what you’re—”

“I am not kind. I am not gentle. I am not human nor do I pretend to be. I kill when I want to.” Laurie gave me a faint grin, but it lacked the usual teasing. “Just so we’re on the same page.”

Suddenly my mouth felt too dry. I swallowed, hoping he hadn’t heard it, and mentally ran through a list of possible responses. Most of them ended in shoving Laurie against a tree and ripping his suit off. I reminded myself, over and over, that those scenarios would only complicate my disastrous life. “Got it. Same page,” was all I could think to say.

Why was it, whenever I was around Laurelis Dondarte, part of me wanted to run while the other part always lingered?

A second passed, then two. “We still need to talk about how to free my demon-possessed brother,” Laurie said, his voice back to normal now.

I knew he was changing the subject for my sake. Even though I hated myself for letting him, I cleared my throat and said, disguising my relief, “Yeah. But Savannah still hasn’t found a spell she can do. There was one passed down in her friend’s line, I guess, but two of the ingredients for it no longer exist. So we still can’t do anything except wait.”

Frustration seeped into my voice. What was the point of having so much power when I couldn’t use it for good? When it was ineffective at a time I needed it most? I’d told Finn we were a pack. It was a promise, and yet here I was, breaking it like I had so many others. Because there was an easy solution to our problem. The agony of the past three days could’ve been prevented, if I were as reckless as I used to be.

“Tell me you haven’t considered it,” Laurie said, startling me. His gaze bored into mine again. “Tell me you’re not actually thinking about Belanor’s deal.”

How did he always know what I was thinking? I looked out at the horizon one more time, committing this place to memory. “I can’t,” I said truthfully. “I have considered it. If I knew what the cost would be, and it didn’t harm anyone else, I would’ve accepted his offer on the spot. But

death follows Belanor everywhere he goes. Odds are that letting him finish the spell would be catastrophic."

Laurie paused. "I agree," he said, failing to hide the undercurrent of relief in his voice.

Our conversation felt finished, but neither of us moved. Now that I remembered what it was like to feel alive, I wasn't ready to go back to that basement. In the silence, I thought of my broken promises again.

There's one I could keep, I thought suddenly. One person I hadn't let down, not yet.

I refocused on Laurie, who gazed back at me with a casual stance, as if he had all the time in the world. "Will you go somewhere with me?"

He answered without hesitation. "Anywhere."

"You wouldn't be back at Court until tonight, probably."

Laurie placed my hand in the crook of his elbow and tugged me into movement. He didn't bother to acknowledge my warning. "Where are we off to, my queen?"

As I considered the best way to answer, I remembered the distant sheen in Gil's eyes that day we drank screwdrivers on Adam's kitchen floor. I heard the broken shame in his voice as he asked, *Will you do me a favor?* My heart cracked a little more at the thought of what I was about to do, but I'd made a promise, and it felt important that I keep one. Just one.

Laurie was still waiting for my answer.

"We're going to London," I said.

England was gray and wet.

Luckily, the shop I put into Google Maps wasn't far from the Door we'd stepped out of. Laurie and I strolled through the streets as if we were here every day. The pavement gleamed with ice and humans hurried by, most of them putting their heads down against the cold.

I spotted it first, a narrow door on our left covered in faded blue paint. A wooden sign hung over it that simply read, *Tattoo.*

"Shit. They're closed," I said, noting the darkened room through a wide window. Just to be thorough, I tried the door handle. It was locked, of course.

Laurie blinked out of sight, then reappeared inside the shop. He turned the deadbolt—I heard it *click*—and opened the door for me. “Welcome to my shop,” he said with a brilliant smile. “What kind of tattoo would you like today? The face of the previous Seelie King, perhaps? I hear he has a face of legend.”

“Oh, he does,” I replied, brushing past. “The legend of Hephaestus, to be more specific. It’s said that he was so ugly his own mother pitched him off the highest mountain in Greece.”

Laurie released a long-suffering sigh. Ignoring him, I looked around the place where Gil had spent so much of his time. There were framed images on the brick walls, tattoos that assumably had been done here. The lines were crisp and the coloring solid. Modern light fixtures dangled from the high ceiling. The furniture in the waiting room had a shabby chic look, and the floor was covered in Persian rugs. I wasn’t sure what I’d expected, but this place fit, I thought. It felt like Gil.

“Who are you? How did you get in here?”

I jumped at the deep, unfamiliar voice that sliced into the quiet. Turning, I jumped again at the sight of a man standing in one of the doorways. He had to be Nicky. Curiosity blazed through me, and I studied Gil’s best friend. He did the same, his sharp eyes bouncing between me and Laurie.

Like most of the people I’d met lately, Nicky was easy on the eyes. He wore a gray newsboy cap, and the brim cast a shadow over his high cheekbones and flawless dark skin, evident even from across the room. A silver hoop curved around one of his nostrils. He wasn’t a Nightmare, but he wasn’t human. His eyes didn’t give anything away—they were an ordinary brown—yet I could sense power around him like an invisible curtain.

That *was a detail Gil left out of his little story*, I thought, making a mental note to call him later. I hadn’t spoken to the vampire since Finn had collapsed. Did he even know what was going on? What if Belanor had gone after him and Adam? I hadn’t gotten a text from them in a while…

“Are you Nicholas?” I asked, pushing the torrent of worried questions away. Now was not the time.

Nicky’s frown deepened. “Yeah, I am. Look, if you want to make an appointment, you need to call during—”

“I have some news. About Gil,” I added.

My tone was the giveaway, though I didn't mean it to be. *The news is bad*, it said. Nicky crossed his arms, then raised one of his hands to put it over his mouth, muffling his next words. "Say it."

"He's dead. I was there when it happened. We were…" I faltered, realizing that the truth could very well put this person in danger. But I didn't want to lose momentum; I was treating this entire conversation like a Band Aid and ripping it off. "We were being held prisoner, because of what we are."

I sensed Laurie's surprise, somehow. His incredulity was justified; I'd taken a gamble, trusting this stranger with the knowledge of my species. But Nicky didn't react. "It was the V, wasn't it?"

"Yes." I didn't flinch as I said it. In a way, it was the truth.

Slowly, Nicky sat down in the closest office chair. He stared through the window across from him, his jaw tight, his hand a fist on the desk. An uncomfortable silence fell. I glanced at Laurie over my shoulder.

What should we do? my expression asked.

Hell if I know, his said back.

"What do you want?" Nicky asked, refocusing on me. His throat moved as he swallowed. "For your mark. I can do it."

I shook my head with a baffled frown. "Mark?"

Nicky made an abrupt gesture with his hand. "Yes, the mark. Gil told me about the custom amongst your kind. I still have some of the ink we used on his last one."

Curiosity got the better of me again. "What did he tell you?"

"He said that if a Nightmare is killed, the one who bears witness to their death gets a mark. To remember. To remind. To carry on the legacy. The ink is bespelled, making it so only other Nightmares can see it." Nicky paused again, and I thought of the tattoos covering Gil's arms. "Once, he mentioned the mark wasn't always a tattoo. Sometimes it was a keloid or a brand."

As he waited for my answer, and I actually considered it, I wondered if my parents had gotten any tattoos. I couldn't recall ever seeing one. If this really was a tradition of our people, they'd never told me about it.

Thinking of them brought back some of the pain I thought I'd left on that sun-dappled hilltop. The truth was, I *had* witnessed the death of a Nightmare. Several, in fact. I liked the thought of etching their memories

on my skin. Acknowledging and claiming my pain, then turning it into something else.

"Look," I said, hesitating, "I would like to get a mark, yes, but you just got some really painful news. I don't expect you to—"

Nicky was already shaking his head. "It would be a good distraction. Honestly, you'd probably be doing me a favor; I won't be sleeping tonight anyway. The studio is back here. Please come on in. Don't think I ever caught your names, by the way. You can call me Nicky."

He moved to open one of the other doors, and I turned to Laurie. I'd already pulled out my phone, knowing that I'd need to talk to Lyari or Savannah if I was going to do this. "It's probably going to take a while. Hours," I told him.

Laurie shrugged. "Fortunately, I brought something to pass the time."

Before I could ask what he meant, he held up a book. The earmarked copy of *Moby Dick* looked identical to the one I had at home. "Have you been in my room again?" I asked wearily.

Laurie just winked.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Lyari was waiting on the front porch when we returned.

Her gaze flicked to Laurie, noting his presence. I could sense the distrust rolling off her in waves before she refocused on me. Even now, she didn't like him.

"Has there been word from Savannah? Did she find a spell?" I asked straightaway, too impatient for greetings or small talk. My phone had died during our time in England, and I hadn't been able to get any updates. Lyari didn't answer—all her attention was on the bandage on my arm now. Her fae senses could probably detect the scent of my blood. I made a dismissive gesture. "It's just a new tattoo."

Her eyes lingered on it, as if she was deciding whether or not to believe me. It had taken eight hours. One of the longest sessions Nicky had ever done, he told me at one point during the night. My new quarter sleeve would take two weeks to heal. At least, two weeks for a human. Now that I was a Nightmare again, I would heal slightly faster. A small bag dangled from my hand, containing an expensive bottle of moisturizer I'd bought at the shop. I'd also spent two thousand dollars on the tattoo itself—and that was after the supposed discount Nicky had given me.

He'd called the style blackwork—tattoos that were made using solely black ink and empty space. Curved around part of my arm, there was the tree from Oliver's dreamscape, each of its branches representing a member of my family. A wolf fit into the tree like a puzzle piece. Next to this, there was a dragon. I had born witness to the Leviathan's death, as well, and it felt right that someone would remember the wild creature it had truly been. For Gil, and the loss of his life as a Nightmare, I'd

borrowed the rose on his shoulder. It all came together like some overgrown, beautifully eerie garden. Like a fairy tale written out on my skin.

"She hasn't found one." I didn't phrase it like a question. My voice was flat, devoid of hope, as if it were draining out of me with each passing second Lyari kept looking at me like that.

"He's dying, Your Majesty," Lyari said.

"I *know* he's dying," I snarled. Instant regret took hold of me, and I spun away—I didn't want an audience as I fought for control. I could feel that dark force rising again, the same one that had driven me to kill dozens of people at that black market. The same darkness Gwyn had seen.

After a moment, I walked back to them, my boots making hollow sounds against the wooden boards. I lifted my head and met Lyari's gaze. "I'm sorry."

She didn't react, but her voice softened in a way I'd never heard it do before. "During one of his lucid periods, the wolf requested the dignity of a swift death, Fortuna."

It was her use of my name that made me pause. I *knew* Finn was suffering, damn it; I'd been watching him fight the demon for three days. If he'd asked Lyari to kill him, it meant he was losing. We were no closer to finding a real exorcism spell, and with every hour that passed, Finn was in agony. Did I have the right to make this decision for him? What would I want, if I were in his position?

I didn't like the answers.

"Fine." My voice was strangled. I gripped the plastic bag so tightly that I felt the sting of my fingernails. "Just… give me a minute."

Laurie finally spoke. "I can do it, Fortuna. I'll be kind to your wolf. He won't feel a thing."

I didn't meet his gaze. I knew that if I did, he would see the terror in my eyes. He could probably smell it anyway. *Fucking faeries*. "No one but me is going to touch Finn," I said.

"Firecracker…" There was a gentle note in Laurie's voice.

"The witch is on guard duty alone. I shall go check on her," Lyari announced. Before either of us could respond, she bowed and went inside. The screen door slammed into the stillness.

"She doesn't like me, does she?" Laurie remarked, staring after the other faerie.

I raised my eyebrows. “Do you care?”

“Perhaps I do.” His tone was speculative, as if he were forming an opinion about something.

“Well, don’t take it personally. Lyari doesn’t trust anyone. Not even me, most days.” With that, I walked away again, returning to the opposite end of the porch. I wrapped my fingers around the wooden railing and stared toward the trees without seeing them. I forced myself to think about what I was about to do.

For Finn, I could do this. For my friend, I could add another nightmare to the dozens of them already living beneath my bed, waiting for their chance to leap out of the darkness.

Minutes later, light footsteps sounded, and a warm body filled the space beside me. A strand of pale, gleaming hair stirred in a breeze, touching my shoulder. Laurie’s scent arrived a moment later, familiar in its allure, eliciting images like laying down in a field of wildflowers or stepping into a hothouse.

I wish I could talk to Collith.

The thought came out of nowhere, and suddenly I found myself comparing them again—Collith and Laurie. If he were here, the faerie I’d loved would have some wise words to comfort me. Lend me strength. Somehow, like a storm rolling in, a slow drizzle giving way to relentless torrents, he’d become the one who made it easy to face my fears. It was different from how I felt when I was with Laurie. Calmer.

But none of this mattered right now.

“Every second I stand here, Finn is in pain,” I said, still staring into the night. There was nothing to see, really—it was too dark, even for my better-than-average eyesight—but I concentrated on the black horizon as though it were a brilliant sunset.

“No one would consider it cowardice if someone else did this,” Laurie said. His voice was casual.

“I would,” I replied quietly. Hearing myself say it out loud helped. I was really doing this.

Finn had suffered long enough. I turned away from Laurie and walked into the house, knots forming inside me. As I neared the basement door, I removed a scrunchie around my wrist and started scraping my hair back, trying to think clinically, as if none of this involved taking the life of someone I loved. The fastest, most painless way to kill a werewolf was a

holy water bullet to the head. The gun at my hip would do the job. *Do the job*. What a strange way to think about killing one of my best friends. An abrupt, strange snicker left me.

"Did I miss a joke?" Laurie asked. I hadn't heard him following, but for once I didn't jump in surprise—maybe some part of me had hoped he would come. He stopped and added, "Or did you finally realize how much that painting looks like an enormous penis? I've been waiting for someone else to notice for weeks."

I thought about telling him to shut up, but Laurie's voice was far better than the silence.

Of course that was the one of the rare moments he stopped talking. We reached the door that led to the basement, and a terrible silence trembled around us.

Laurie started to respond, but then a familiar voice drifted through the air. "Are you going to leave me down here forever, Fortuna Sworn?"

For a moment or two, I genuinely believed I was going to vomit. The world tilted, and I moved to grab hold of something and wait until this dream passed. Because it had to be a dream, another terrible nightmare pouncing on me within the night. Maybe I was still at the Seelie Court, and these past few days had been another mind game. God, suddenly I hoped that was actually true.

The faerie at my side watched me regain control, his expression unreadable. When he spoke again, his voice was uncharacteristically solemn. "Are you ready for this?"

Neither of us would like my response, so I said nothing. I turned around, touching the gun at my hip to make sure it was still there. But I didn't move. Not yet—I had to wipe all expression from my face first. Had to hide the fear and pain, so the person waiting below didn't see it. Then I looked down and willed myself to move.

Never had I stared so intently at a doorknob. It gleamed dully in the lamplight, dented and faded from so many years of use. Desperate for any kind of delay or distraction, I allowed myself to wonder about all the people that had touched this doorknob before. What sort of lives they'd led. Whether they'd ever found themselves in a moment like this.

The air trembled with an enraged scream. I almost recoiled, but somehow I stayed in place, gathering the last of my resolve. My hand

returned to the gun at my hip, partly in reassurance, and partly in some desperate hope that it wouldn't be there.

With one more deep, fortifying breath, I finally opened the door and went to kill someone I loved.

I walked down the short flight of steps, trying to hide how my insides still quivered. The lightbulb above us made a slight buzzing sound. I knelt just outside the chalk boundary and peered into the darkness with ice in my eyes. Savannah and Lyari stood nearby, both of them tense.

The demon was conscious and sitting cross-legged in the circle. It still wore Finn's human shape, but there was nothing of my dear friend in the face that looked back at me. It seemed he'd finally lost the battle.

The second I laid eyes on him, though, I knew I couldn't do it. Not this. Maybe it should've been easy, after all the lives I'd taken, but apparently even I had limits. All my resolve crumbled into dust.

"Does Belanor's offer still stand?" I asked bluntly. Laurie and Lyari made mutual sounds of frustration.

The demon and I ignored them. The creature pouted and gave me a slow headshake of disappointment. "What, no pleasantries? No clever banter or exchange of intelligent minds?"

"I'd hardly call you intelligent, since you've pissed off someone who *will* make sure death is slow and painful," I countered.

The demon tilted its head. "How? How will you make sure of that? I'm curious."

I gave it a tight smile. "I'll let that question haunt you. Eat away at you. And then, once you start to feel safe again, that's when I'll come for you."

"I'm terrified," the creature said with a mocking shudder. "Truly, I'm shaking in my boots. Or should I say, I'm trembling in Finn's boots. Poor fellow. He's still in here, you know. He can hear and see everything."

Its words sent a chill through me, but I kept my face void of all expression. "I'm only going to ask one more time. Will Belanor still accept me in exchange for getting the fuck out of my friend?"

"Yes, the king's offer stands," the demon said with a hint of impatience. "There is a witch standing outside as we speak."

At this, I looked toward the window, as if the witch would be peering at us through an opening in the cardboard. But it was smooth and intact. I turned back to the demon, allowing another silence to creep over the room.

“What will the spell accomplish?” I asked eventually. I knew it was pointless, but I had to ask anyway.

“You didn’t know? It will turn the air into cotton candy and make you cry tears of rose petals,” the demon chirped. And despite my resolve to show no emotion, to avoid any sort of reaction that would ruin the plan I was starting to form, my hands clenched into fists. I wanted to leap forward and beat this thing’s face into a bloody pulp. But it was my friend’s face I would be hurting. My friend’s blood I’d be spilling.

“I’ll let you complete the spell,” I said, and the demon’s eyes glittered with triumph. Then I added, “But only if Belanor supervises while it’s happening. I don’t want some amateur witch fucking with my body.”

The demon considered this. I held my breath. “I will need to consult with the Seelie King before I agree, of course,” it said after an agonizing pause.

“Fine,” I said curtly. I raised my gaze to the faerie standing across from me, her face sharp with suspicion. “Lyari, can you keep watch a little longer?”

She responded with a single nod. I inclined my head at Laurie, and he followed me back to the main floor. I expected him to launch into questions, but he must’ve seen through my act downstairs, just as Lyari had. He stayed silent as we moved away from the door.

“Is there really a witch outside?” I asked under my breath.

Laurie vanished, then reappeared less than three seconds later. “Yes.”

“I have another idea,” I told him.

“Is it a good idea?”

I swallowed. “It’s… an idea. A way to get an exorcism spell, free Finn and Belanor, and figure out who’s been pulling your brother’s strings all these years. Fair warning, this plan would mean getting Collith involved.”

Laurie raised his brows. “You’re embarrassing me. I’m supposed to be the one coming up with clever plans around here.”

“First,” I said, ignoring this, “I need to go for a walk. Care to join me? I’ll explain on the way.”

The Seelie Prince put his hand against his chest. “I’d follow you anywhere, Fortuna Sworn.”

I rolled my eyes, but a faint smile curved my lips. “Just put on one of your ridiculous coats so we can go, Princess Laurelis.”

“Excuse you.” Laurie sniffed as he opened the front door for me. Thankfully, I’d never taken off my coat, and I stepped through without stopping. Laurie followed me and continued, “Before the week is over, it shall be *Queen* Laurelis, and don’t you forget it.”

At the bottom of the porch steps, I looped my arm through his, and I couldn’t help noting how easy it was. Touching him, being with him. “I could never,” I said honestly.

I led the faerie prince back into the woods, silently gathering my courage.

I’d need it for what we were about to do next.

Nearly twenty-four hours later, I sat on the porch steps.

The goblin ring felt like a weight on my finger as we waited. My body screamed with exhaustion, even as adrenaline coursed through it—I’d barely slept in the past day, not to mention the three days before that.

As agreed upon, per the messages we’d passed back and forth through the demon, Belanor arrived at seven o’clock. He strolled out of the trees as if he were arriving at a tea party. He wore clothing that only a fae courtier would put on, his thin frame accented by a golden vest and black leggings, the ends of which vanished into a tall pair of riding boots. The scarred half of his face was hidden by glamour.

By all appearances, he’d come alone. But I knew Belanor wouldn’t be so foolish. There were probably guards hidden in the woods, and I wouldn’t be surprised if cherubim were nearby, as well.

The new king stopped in front of us. He looked at me first, resting one hand on the pommel of his sword. “And who might you be?”

“I am Lyari of the bloodline Paynore, Right Hand to Queen Fortuna,” I said without hesitation. This was the first gamble to my plan—if Belanor knew what Lyari looked like, we were in trouble. The goblin ring was bespelled to create a bland face, not a specific one. But it made sense Lyari would be here, since her connection to me was public knowledge. The real one was with my family, watching over them in case this confrontation went horribly wrong.

Making a thoughtful sound, Belanor's eyes shifted to the figure next to me. I held my breath, worried he'd sense Collith's power around her. It was the witch Belanor had sent to the house, but now she wore my face. My real face, which Belanor had seen during my time as a human. She sat very still, because Collith had made her believe she was surrounded by venomous snakes.

The Seelie King peered at her closely, his gaze lingering a beat too long. "Nothing to say, Miss Sworn? You're so silent. Very unlike you," he remarked.

A vibration went through the witch's body, and I knew she was trying to speak past the gag we'd put on her. I spoke quickly, hoping to draw Belanor's interest back to me. "She had an altercation with your demon. The creature bit out her tongue."

"How tragic," he commented, sounding anything but sympathetic. "Shall we begin, then?"

The faerie took a step closer, and I moved subtly, positioning myself in front of the fake Fortuna. "First, tell your demon to stop squatting in our werewolf," I said.

Belanor considered this. His reply was slow and pensive. "I could do that. But how do I know you won't go back on your word, once your friend is freed?"

"How do we know you won't go back on yours?" I countered.

"Well, it seems we are at an impasse." His gaze moved past me and studied the house, as if he could see through the walls. "Where is my dear brother, by the way? He must be here, of course. You keep him on such a tight leash."

"Laurie is with the queen's family," I snapped, briefly losing my grip on the calm I'd wrapped around me. "She had them removed for their safety."

Belanor listened for another beat. "Not all of them, apparently. I hear movement inside."

Before I could respond, he blinked out of sight. I swore under my breath and abandoned the witch, rushing up the steps and through the front door. I stopped so suddenly that my boots screeched on the wooden floor.

Belanor stood in the living room with a knife's edge held over Damon's throat.

Seeing his hands on my brother had the effect of a flipped switch—a wave of fury crashed over me, so icy cold that I couldn't breathe. "Let him go. Now," I said. "I won't tell you twice."

"I'll let him go once you've allowed my witch to complete the spell." The king spoke so lightly, his tone like a spring breeze wafting past a merry picnic. "She should still be outside, yes?"

His response made it clear that he knew exactly who I was. We hadn't fooled him. Not for a second.

I was reminded, once again, of my loathing for faekind, no matter how much had changed within the past few months. My heart pounded hard and fast against my chest. Belanor heard its wild beat, and his teeth gleamed white as he smiled. He thought the fear would break me. He thought it would cloud my mind. But despite his desperate desire for a Nightmare, he had no idea what we truly were.

We were creatures who walked hand-in-hand with the dark. Fear whispered secrets in our ears and we'd learned to listen rather than cower.

"Not until you free Finn," I answered. There was no doubt in my voice, and I could tell Belanor heard this, too. Frustration flashed in his eyes, there and gone within an instant.

"Just remember," he said, his voice pleasant, "you could have prevented this."

Without another word, the Seelie King snapped my brother's neck. The sound of bone breaking felt like a bad dream. I heard myself scream as Damon's body fell to the floor in a graceless heap.

Belanor tugged at his sleeves and stepped over it, his focus still on me. The intensity of that look said everything I needed to know—if I wouldn't go with Belanor willingly, he'd take me by force. Again.

I whirled, making the rug twist beneath me, and I scrabbled at the couch for balance as I ran. Belanor followed at a leisurely pace, his eyes gleaming like an animal on the hunt. I flew past all the bedrooms. My ragged breathing was loud in my ears. I slammed into the door that led downstairs, fumbling for the knob with sweaty palms, and I wrenched it open just as Belanor turned the corner and appeared at the end of the hall.

I thundered down the narrow steps and burst into the basement. It was dim and quiet, the spot where Finn had been lying chained empty. I was about to rush toward the window when Belanor materialized. A startled sound burst from my lips and I froze.

“Where will you go now, little mouse?” the faerie asked, sounding genuinely curious. I backed away with wide eyes, my hands clenching and unclenching, as if I could summon a weapon by sheer will. Belanor’s gaze flicked down, seeing this, and he smiled. We both knew I was at his mercy. He pursued me deeper into the room, emanating a smug sort of anticipation, like a cat batting its prey around before closing in for the kill.

My terror fell away like a layer of snow. I straightened and looked at Belanor coldly.

He saw the change in me. A line deepened between his brows. The king started forward…

…and slammed face-first into an invisible wall. I smirked as Belanor reeled back, blood spurting from his nose. His hand rose to staunch the flow, and his eyes rose to mine again, dark with fury.

Behind me, I sensed Laurie emerge from the darkness. “Hello, brother,” he crooned.

Belanor laughed. “This is your grand trick? Trapping me in a chalk circle with my weak, simpering twin?”

“Actually,” Laurie drawled, “I’m just here for the show. And to provide moral support, of course. I am a selfless creature, after all.”

At the same time Belanor started to respond, Collith appeared on my other side. The gap in his neck already healed, but there was a smear of blood left behind. Seeing that, Belanor went utterly still, his gaze darting between us.

The plan had been simple, really.

In order to get Belanor to the basement, where the new chalk circle awaited, I knew he would need to believe my fear was real. He had to think I’d lost control. Seeing my brother killed would certainly do that. I’d also been worried about the knife Belanor used to do it, the second gamble of the evening—that part had involved relying on Peeks, and trusting he would get close enough to switch out the blade Belanor always kept on his person—but it was a risk Collith had been willing to take when we talked about the possibility of Peeks failing.

“The real trick was figuring out how to get your cowardly ass out of that palace,” I told Belanor, keeping my voice level. “We figured you wouldn’t be reasonable once you got here, so we had a witch of our own alter the confinement spell, specifically tailor it for you by using strands of your hair as she casted. You can go in, but you can’t come back out.

Now, before we proceed, you're going to tell me why *your* spell is so important. What does it do?"

Belanor tilted his head. He was pretending to be completely unbothered by this turn of events, but I knew he had to be a little worried. Still, there was nothing beyond curiosity in his voice when he asked, "Where's the werewolf?"

I flapped my hand in a dismissive gesture. "Oh, I took care of it—got rid of the demon myself. I didn't need your miserable ass for anything. We honestly lured you here to get some answers, and to help you, of course."

"Help me?" Belanor restated. Now his expression held a little more than curiosity. "How? How did you save the host?"

His question sent my mind back to that morning. It had all started when Laurie and I started off toward the woods.

"I could never," I told the faerie at my side, squeezing his arm. He smiled but said nothing. I knew he was waiting for me to go on. Laurie had a lot riding on the outcome of tonight, as well.

Sunlight streamed through the tree branches overhead. It warmed my skin as I told him where we were going. I also outlined the rest of my idea for how to defeat Belanor. Laurie asked a question now and then, his expression focused. When I was finished, he improved upon what I'd said with some suggestions of his own.

"This can work," Laurie remarked a few minutes later.

His tone made my heart pound. "This can work," I agreed.

After an hour or two, we arrived at a river. The river that my entire plan hinged upon. A crow swooped overhead, cawing loudly. Laurie hung back, as we'd agreed upon when I explained my plan to him. I knelt at the water's edge and took slow, even breaths. The mud was frozen, mostly, but the cold still crept through my knee. Remembering what every second cost Finn, I stopped wasting time and cut the fleshy part of my hand with Dad's knife. I clenched it into a shaking fist and sent drops of blood down the current. Once the bleeding slowed, I looked back at Laurie and gave him a thumb's up, indicating that phase one was done.

We waited an hour. Laurie was starting to fidget when the kelpie arrived. The kelpie that I should have thought of days ago when Finn had first collapsed.

Its voice sounded in my head. Nightmare. Have you come to settle our debt? *it asked me.*

Laurie didn't react, and I knew he couldn't hear it. But he saw it—his eyes narrowed and his fingers twitched, as if he wanted to reach for his sword. I didn't blame him. The creature emerging from the water was disconcerting, to say the least. There were fins where pointed ears would be on a horse, and it had a scaly hide instead of a lovely coat. Through strands of black hair, the creature's eyes were white and unseeing. The rest of its body was dark as the Witching Hour.

Like the last time I'd interacted with this creature, its presence inside my skull was painful. "Yes. I need an exorcism spell," I told it, flinching.

The kelpie went silent, and there was a slight pressure on the air. I felt the prickle of magic. Check your pocket, *it said after an extended pause.*

Could it really be this easy? Deafened by my rapid heartbeat, I moved to obey. My fingers slid along the edge of something small. I pulled it into the open and discovered that I held a delicate roll of paper. I unrolled it carefully. There was a column of faded writing, and the messy scrawl was nearly impossible to read. It looked like a page from a witch's spellbook—even the edge was uneven, as if it had been torn free from its binding.

They are Words, *the kelpie informed me*. I see you recognize them.

I did recognize them, because some of the things on this paper matched the spell I'd found in Kindreth's journal. The one I'd used to bind Gil to me. "What are Words?" I asked, frowning.

'He spoke and they came to be,' *the kelpie quoted.* At the beginning of everything, God created the dimensions with Words. Enochian is the language of angels. Words are the language of the entity that created all of this. If you want to know more, Nightmare, it will cost you. Our debt was settled with my delivery of the spell. Shall I continue?

Kelpies didn't have eyebrows, but at that moment, I swore this one did. I fought a wave of dislike and answered, "No. That won't be necessary. Will I need anything else for this spell?"

It snorted impatiently, releasing a cloud of breath from each wide nostril. You will need a witch, of course, and whatever ingredients the magic requires as a conduit. I suppose I should warn you the host's body probably won't endure the extraction, even if you do succeed, *the kelpie added.*

That wasn't an option. I stood there, my jaw clenched as I considered a new possibility. "What if he could borrow someone else's strength? Would that guarantee his survival?"

The kelpie's voice filled with speculation. I suppose that could work. Magic is unpredictable.

I said nothing, and the creature began to retreat. Its massive hooves crushed ice and mud, and to my ears, the sound it made was like the crunch of a hundred bones.

"How many people have you killed?" I asked suddenly. The kelpie halted and turned its long head back to me. Its milky eyes latched onto my face as if it could actually see me.

Why would one count grains of sand on a beach? *the creature questioned.* That is how it would feel keeping count of my meals.

Hearing this, I felt my power coil around me. The kelpie continued toward the water, flicking its tail like a mocking wave.

"Fortuna," Laurie said, a note of rare caution in his voice. He must've seen something in my posture that hinted at what I was thinking. I hesitated, and that single pause was long enough for the kelpie to slip away, vanishing beneath the black water. I watched the ripples disappear, too. Laurie's voice reached me through the haze again.

"You have the spell. The werewolf is waiting. Let's go," he said. Telling myself he was right, I nodded and turned.

But as I walked away from the river, I wondered if the choice I'd just made would haunt me for the rest of my life.

I tucked the memory away as Finn stepped out of the darkness and stopped at my side.

The brand-new bond between us flared, reacting to our proximity—the bond we'd forged to save Finn's life once the demon had been ripped out. Even now, hours later, thinking about the exorcism made me wince. Savannah's chants and the demon's screams still echoed in my ears.

It had taken us hours to extract that parasite from Finn's body.

After speaking to the kelpie, Laurie and I immediately returned home. Savannah went out to fetch the ingredients for the spell I gave her. Once she returned, all of us formed a circle around Finn—me, Laurie, Savannah, Collith, and Lyari. Savannah drew the werewolf's blood and began to recite the Words.

His big frame jerked like he was being electrified. The lights flickered like they would in a horror movie. A line of foam filled Finn's mouth. Twice, I almost told Savannah she should stop, just for a few seconds to let Finn breathe. But the necromancer had warned us that once she started the

spell, she couldn't break the chant or we'd have to go back to the beginning.

Her voice went on and on. The demon's scream pierced my ears and the wind shoved at me. I fought to stay focused on Finn. This was taking too long. The demon would destroy Finn's body on its way out, leaving my friend's soul with nowhere to go but the afterlife.

Not an option, I thought again.

S*he needed more power.*

Rushing over to Savannah, I peered over her shoulder and added my voice to hers. I saw her twitch in surprise, and I realized she hadn't known I could do magic. That conversation would have to wait. I kept my eyes on the Words; they were easier to interpret with Savannah saying them a split second before I did.

We'd only been chanting for a few seconds when the demonic scream cut short. Moving so fast that my eyes couldn't follow, Finn flew upright. Though I faltered, Savannah was relentless, and she was the reason I was able to continue. We'd barely said more than seven Words when Finn's stomach lurched, and then a black, tar-like substance expelled from his mouth and splattered across the floor. Still we chanted.

Once he'd gotten all of the revolting liquid out, Finn sat there for a moment, staring at me. After another moment, he tipped face-first onto the concrete. He didn't get back up. He didn't stir at all, in fact.

Savannah finally fell silent.

Following her lead, I trailed off, too. I stared at Finn and waited, but he just drowned in a pool of his own blood.

"Is he breathing?" I asked, glancing desperately toward the faeries in the room.

My gaze happened to skim over Collith at the same moment he looked up. Our gazes caught and held. "Yes, but his lungs will give out soon," he said.

He didn't sugarcoat it or offer false hope, which I appreciated. Was this what the honest version of Collith was like?

Dismissing my irrelevant line of thinking, I looked back down at the werewolf. He was dying, there was no denying it. If I didn't act, Finn would never see what else life had to offer him. I heard echoes of those questions I'd asked the kelpie. What if he could borrow someone else's strength? Would that guarantee his survival?

I suppose that could work.

Remembering those words, I made my choice. Attempting to save Finn with magic was better than letting him slip away. I sat on the floor beside him, reaching over the chalk boundary for his hand.

"Repeat after me," I said, hoping he didn't notice the waver in my voice. "Finn, we need to make the Blood Vow. But to do that, you have to stay awake, okay?"

Somehow, the werewolf heard me. He nodded, and I pulled out Dad's pocketknife again. Seconds later, I clasped our bloody hands together and began a different spell. Finn's sticky lips parted, and he croaked his words.

It worked. Against all odds, it worked.

The instant I felt our connection, magic sparking like a fallen power line, I refocused on saving Finn's life. I grabbed the thread between me and Gil, along with one I found inside myself, and threw them around the new bond. It was fainter than it should've been, flickering in and out.

Take our strength, *I instructed the connection, knowing some of it was Finn's psyche. He'd hear the alpha in my voice, and the werewolf would react instinctively. Light streamed from me and Gil, flowing into Finn.*

When I opened my eyes again, he had fully regained consciousness, and his wounds were already closing.

Realizing that I still hadn't answered Belanor's question, I tucked this memory away, too.

How did you save the host? the Seelie King had asked. But now Savannah was appearing on my other side, and he'd never get an answer. We had Belanor where we wanted him. I was ready to get this over with.

Savannah had been standing in a corner where none of the light reached, hiding her from sight. She held her spellbook with white-tipped fingers, and the kelpie's scrap of paper rested on top of the pages.

"If you won't tell us what your spell is supposed to do," I said to Belanor, imitating the affable tone he'd used earlier, "then maybe your host will."

My meaning was clear, especially with a witch standing next to me—we were going to do an exorcism on him. Not only would it save Belanor, and possibly restore the brother Laurie had once loved, but the pain of the spell would be torture for him. The odds were high that he'd give up the name of his master to make it stop.

The sound of Belanor's laughter startled everyone in the basement.

“You think I’m possessed?” he said. “I am no puppet, dancing on someone’s strings. I am a *king*, you insignificant flea!”

Silence fell among the five of us as the Seelie King started to laugh again. I could feel my companions looking at me, probably wondering what our next move was. I stood there and waited for silence. I believed Belanor’s claim—the spell I’d witnessed in his head *had* been a possession spell of some kind, but his voice rang with truth just now.

It meant that Belanor had made his own choices.

“This is excellent news,” I said once the king was finished chortling. Hearing a shift in my tone, his brows lowered, and I could practically see Belanor’s thoughts racing as he tried to figure out why I wasn’t panicking. I tucked my emotions into that dark place where they wouldn’t hinder me. I smiled and added, “If you’re not possessed, it means I can do this.”

I knew that Belanor’s mind would be well-guarded, and I knew I’d pay for it later. I just didn’t care—I burst into his thoughts and memories like a missile.

This hadn’t been part of the plan. Earlier, as the three of us discussed laying this trap for Belanor, we’d decided Laurie would be the one to kill him, if it came to that. But it stood to reason that whoever Belanor was working for, he was afraid of them. If there was no demon in his head, I’d be able to find the memories I needed.

This time, I dug past the things I’d seen when I was last here. I hadn’t gotten much farther when I found a memory that took place mere days after the witch had forcibly performed a spell on Belanor. I saw a single image, one of the young prince sitting in an armchair, looking dispassionately down at a book.

Belanor, a voice whispered.

Just before I reached for the rest, I drew back to reality. Belanor might not survive the next few seconds, and if he died, I wanted to get in the last word. I leaned down to whisper in my tormentor’s ear, “You were never going to be as good as Laurie.”

Then I was back in his head, heading for that memory. The fear that would hold the answers I sought.

But before I could bear witness to the moment Belanor had met his master, I felt the king’s roar of panic and rage. It vibrated through me as if I were in the ocean and a tremor had gone through the water.

“Fortuna, stop him!”

My eyes shot open. I didn't know who had shouted, but it didn't matter; my attention zeroed in on Belanor.

He stood with the edge of the handcuff at his throat.

We'd never bothered to retrieve the other pair after the demon had torn them open, I thought with another rush of adrenaline. The cuffs had also been soaked in holy water recently, so the ragged edge would be fatal. We had to stop him. If Belanor went through with this, the knowledge of his master's identity would die with him. How had he broken free of my power?

His eyes met mine, and they shone with a manic sort of disbelief. "This isn't the end," he said. "Look to the morning star. That's where we'll meet again."

His arm tensed. Collith sprang forward in an attempt to grab him, but it was too late. I was too late to use my abilities, as well. The Seelie King dragged the broken cuff across his neck, using his fae strength to inflict the damage. Blood spurted down the front of his gold vest, looking black in the weak light. Belanor swayed for a moment, his expression going slack.

No one moved to catch him as he fell.

Laurie was the one to end the stunned silence. He sounded as shocked as I felt. "Bel killed himself. He actually did it."

"Fuck," I spat, making Savannah jump. "*Fuck*."

I swung away from Belanor and had an urge to kick something. I knew I should've been thinking of Laurie's loss, but I could only focus on the rage. I'd underestimated how far Belanor would go to protect his master. Without him, without Jacob, I was at another dead end. I'd wanted to find him, the creature that had caused so much pain, harm, and death to countless Nightmares and other innocents. To my own family.

Speaking of my family. Letting out a breath, I took my cell phone off one of the metal shelves—I'd put it there before Belanor's arrival, worried it would be damaged during the mad dash from the living room to the basement—and found Damon's name in the contact list. Miraculously, three bars glowed in the upper righthand corner, so I called him right there.

My brother answered on the first ring, as if he'd been staring at his phone the entire time they'd been gone. "Are you okay? Is everyone all right?"

“You can come back,” I said tonelessly, staring down at Belanor’s corpse again. “Yes, we’re fine. We won this round.”

“Be there in twenty.”

The line went dead, and I put my phone in my pocket, still staring at the dead faerie on the floor. I heard the triumph in Belanor’s voice as he hissed, *This isn’t the end*. I saw his throat opening again. That blue-black blood flying like someone had flicked a paintbrush.

Air. I needed air.

“I’ll… be right back,” I said to the others, sounding strange, even to my own ears.

“What about Belanor’s guards?” one of them questioned.

“They would’ve felt Belanor’s death. They have no reason to attack now.” Without waiting for a response, I spun and hurried up the stairs. I pretended not to feel the multiple gazes boring into my back, and then I was on the main floor, out of their sight. I rushed through the front door and onto the porch.

Just as I’d predicted, there was no sign of Belanor’s creatures or protectors. His witch was long gone, too, which we’d expected when making the plan for tonight’s takedown. That was why we hadn’t bothered keeping watch over her once Belanor sifted inside the house. Laurie had wanted to kill her, but I refused. Our main concern was Belanor. Once we cut off the head of the snake, his followers would scatter and cease to matter.

I leaned against the railing, searching the dark with a thoughtful frown. Maybe their absence wasn’t because they’d felt Belanor’s death and slinked away—maybe he truly had come alone. If that was the case, then Belanor’s arrogance had been the cause of his downfall.

I wanted to learn from his mistakes. Anything to avoid meeting the same end. I didn’t want to cut my own throat in a dim, concrete basement. Alone. Hated.

I stood there for so long the cold began to creep through my bones. No one tried to speak with me. Not even Finn. Though I tried to keep my mind empty, it felt like I’d lost hold of the reins to myself. Thoughts and emotions galloped through me.

In the space of a single day, I’d managed to bind another person to me and take yet another life. I may not have cut Belanor’s throat myself, but his death was my doing. He’d deserved it, I knew that… and yet, guilt was

already breathing down my neck. Guilt for liking it. Guilt for enjoying his violent end. It meant that Gwyn really was right about me. What if, in spite of all my efforts, I was still on the path to becoming her?

Something moved at the corner of my eye, pulling me out of the swamp of thoughts I'd fallen into.

This time, I wasn't surprised to see Laurie at my side. He stared out at the black sky, as well. I expected him to say something about Belanor, or acknowledge that he'd lost a brother today. Instead Laurie said, his tone matter-of-fact, "Do you have any idea how magnificent you are?"

I gripped the railing, uncertain why the words made my insides roil. "Stop. Please. I'm a fucking monster."

He didn't try to tell me otherwise—it was probably obvious that I was drowning in self-loathing—and a hush surrounded us. Stars had begun to emerge, faint and tiny. The tops of the trees were barely visible against the indigo backdrop of sky. After a minute, Laurie turned, his bright eyes refocusing on my face. "We did it," he said fiercely. "All of it. You and your wolf are safe, and with Belanor dead, I'm next in line for the throne. We should be celebrating!"

"Congratulations." The lackluster response was all I could manage.

Laurie must've heard something in my voice he didn't like. His brow lowered, and he searched my expression. "I would never try to change you, Fortuna," he told me.

Like Collith, he had figured out what I was afraid of, and he meant this as a compliment. A reassurance. Strangely, these words weren't ones I wanted to hear, either. I wasn't sure what I'd wanted, exactly, but his response made my heart withdraw. "And that's why you aren't good for me, Laurie," I whispered.

He frowned and gave me another assessing look. Then Laurie opened his mouth, suddenly looking more determined.

Whatever he'd been about to say was cut short when a voice said from behind, "The bloodlines are already gathering for your coronation."

Laurie and I turned in unison, and my heart stumbled when I saw that his mother stood near the bottom of the steps.

Mab wore a gown of pure, midnight black, and her hair was covered in a dark veil. Though immortal, the faerie looked like she'd aged since our last encounter. *Grief*, I thought. It was grief I saw in the lines beneath her

eyes and the chalky cast to her skin. In spite of his flaws, Mab had loved Belanor.

She was in mourning.

The sight of the Seelie Queen standing in our driveway was unsettling. Laurie seemed to share this opinion, because there was a cautious edge to his voice. “Mother, what are you doing here?”

She acted as if he hadn’t spoken. “I keep expecting more questions to arise as your dragon spreads the story of how Belanor died. A lover’s quarrel, was it? Such a common way to die, and Belanor was not common. But the few voices that do speak out are quickly and discreetly silenced. Earlier, when the council voted on how to handle the order of succession, the majority was in your favor. We’d been adjourned for a matter of minutes when they began the arrangements for your party. Belanor’s funeral has yet to be planned. It took him weeks to be crowned. The web you have weaved is truly lovely, son. Even I underestimated your capabilities.

“But before our people swear fealty and I entrust you with my throne again, Laurelis, you must acknowledge the truth,” the queen concluded.

“And what truth is that?” Laurie’s tone had become weary, and I recognized it from the last conversation I’d observed between him and his mother—as if he didn’t want to ask, but it was inevitable and he’d stopped fighting.

Mab held his gaze. I expected her expression to be stern, commanding. Instead, she regarded Laurie with sympathy. “The truth is why I’m here. You cannot have both, my dear,” she told him. “You cannot have the Nightmare and the throne. She weakens you. You never would’ve lost it in the first place if it hadn’t been for her.”

I was too tired to tell Mab that I had a name. I stood there and waited for Laurie to make one of his trademark jokes or comments, but he was silent. I looked at him, my gaze sharp. My pulse quickened at his continued silence. What if… what if Laurie agreed with her? Instant denial rose up, then I thought back to all the time he’d spent at my side or saving me. The denial evaporated.

There is unrest in my Court, Laurie had said once. That was before he made his sacrifice at the tomb, which had also been because of me. Even if he hadn’t given up his throne, his relationship with me had been filling it with small cracks.

Laurie still hadn’t responded to Mab. Sensing that he was about to, I silenced my thoughts. I couldn’t seem to do anything about my swirling emotions, though.

“I will not discuss this with you,” Laurie said at last. His beautiful face was pale and remote, every inch of him a faerie.

That was when I knew—he’d made a choice, whether or not he wanted to admit it. Laurelis Dondarte had gotten a taste of what his life would be like without that crown, without that throne, and apparently it had been more sour than sweet.

“Why don’t I give you two some privacy?” I suggested abruptly, my voice tight.

Neither of them responded, and the swollen silence only strengthened my urge to flee. As I went down the stairs, I thought about telling Mab I was sorry for the death of her son. But it would’ve been a lie, so I walked past silently.

Laurie didn’t try to stop me.

This was usually the part where I went to Adam’s, or ran through the woods, or made a drink. Tonight, I didn’t do any of that. Walking on legs that didn’t feel like mine, my thoughts distant and hazy, I crossed the driveway and went into the barn. The door thudded shut behind me. Upstairs, I trudged across the empty, darkened loft and into my room.

I fell into my bed fully clothed and curled into a ball. After a moment, as if I was a child again, I tugged the covers over my head.

And at long last, I slept.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

I had been avoiding Oliver and the dreamscape.

Ever since we'd faced the harpies, and learned the truth about what my parents had done, my slumber had been shallow and restless. The closest I'd gotten to Oliver was brief glimpses and flickers, like a camera going in and out of focus. I had seen his golden hair. Blue skies. Rustling treetops. Distant mountains. Frothing sea waves.

Since our hunt for memories was over, I didn't picture any landmarks as the darkness claimed me. For a few seconds, I allowed myself to hope I'd stay there, deep in oblivion. But when a fragrant breeze whispered against my skin, I knew I'd arrived at the dreamscape. I opened my eyes, uncertain what to expect or where I'd find myself.

I wasn't surprised, somehow, to discover that I was back at the oak tree. Back in the meadow that resided next to the sea, where there were no memories to haunt or hurt me. The crickets were loud tonight. Their song, usually soothing, grated in my ears. It wasn't quite morning, but the stars had begun to fade. The horizon was a blend of pink and yellow. I wore my favorite pair of lounge pants and a white tank top, which I'd fallen asleep in. I searched for Oliver, trying not to look at the place where our stone cottage had once stood. Its absence still felt like a wound, and seeing the stone walkway that led to nowhere was like someone putting their fingers inside my torn flesh.

Footsteps sounded behind me. I turned and watched Oliver walk up the beaten path. His hands were shoved into the pockets of his faded jeans, his shoulders hunched beneath a wool sweater. There was no sign of our backpacks or the supplies we'd used to cross this wild, dangerous world.

“There’s something else I need to show you,” he said by way of greeting. There was a strange note in his voice, a thread of tension that seemed to weave through the rest of his body, too. The questions I’d been about to ask faded on my tongue, and I just nodded. Oliver reached the tree, then walked past. I fell into step beside him, and that was when I noticed that my feet were bare. Something stopped me from asking Oliver about the location of my hiking boots, though.

He led me to the cliffside, but not our usual spot, where we always sat and dangled our legs. Instead, we continued onward, keeping close to sea and sky. It was the opposite direction we’d gone when we first set off on our adventure. After we’d gone a mile or two, Oliver turned and met my gaze. He stood close enough to the edge that one misstep, one slip, and I knew he’d be gone. His expression was careful, neutral, and it was so unlike him that I still couldn’t bring myself to speak.

Without a word, he knelt and lowered himself over the cliff, then dangled there. I scrambled to do the same, because it was Ollie, and the instinct lived in my bones. To follow him everywhere, follow him into anything, no matter what end awaited us there.

Our gazes met, brown to blue, and our hair stirred in the salty breeze. My arms already hurt, but I knew I’d hold on however long I needed to. “Now what?” I managed, breathless. My heart raced.

“Do you trust me?” Oliver asked.

The answer should have been complicated. After all, the rules of this place were different now—if I hit the water too hard, I could really be hurt. Not to mention that things between us were stilted and undefined. But I looked at Oliver steadily and didn’t hesitate. “With my life,” I said.

“Then let go.”

Of course. Even now, though, I didn’t question him. This moment felt important, heavy with meaning in a way I didn’t fully understand. Releasing an anxious breath, I squeezed my eyes shut and opened my fingers. I fell…

…and landed on solid rock a few feet down. It was a thick ledge, I realized, turning in a circle. From above, it had camouflaged perfectly with the cliffside below it. To my left, a shallow cave deepened into black. Oliver dropped beside me and shoved his sleeves up to his elbows. It was a nervous gesture, I thought, watching him closely.

“You couldn’t just tell me I wasn’t about to fall to my death?” I asked, giving Oliver a halfhearted glare.

His gaze was still guarded, and even now, he didn’t sound like himself as he answered, “I wanted you to remember.”

“Remember what?”

His throat moved. “That I would never hurt you.”

My patience began to unravel. What was this? Why was he acting so guilty? Before I could demand an explanation, though, Oliver’s gaze shifted. I followed it automatically, twisting to see the rest of the cave.

My annoyance dried up when I saw there was a bed behind us. I recognized the pink blanket and the unicorn lamp resting on the nightstand. There was a small lump beneath the covers, and as I drew nearer, I knew it would be me lying in that bed. *It’s another memory*, I thought, momentarily blinded by a kaleidoscope of feeling. Fear, dread, anticipation. Confusion, as well. Had Oliver—

Then the younger me rolled over, allowing me to see her face. I forgot my fear and moved even closer. She was obviously on the verge of a bad dream; her eyes fluttered again and again, like a bird giving its wings an agitated flap. There came the sound of a door opening, though the door itself was nowhere to be seen.

The breath caught in my throat when my parents appeared.

No matter how many times I saw them, I knew it would always feel like this. As if there was a fist around my heart, the fingers closing, tightening, squeezing. I studied them hungrily, memorizing every detail. Dad wore striped pajama bottoms and a gray T-shirt while Mom wore a silk nightgown that hugged her every curve. His expression was worried, but hers was calm. Maybe a little sad, too.

Without waking younger Fortuna—although I must’ve been aware of their presence to some degree, or this memory wouldn’t exist—Mom settled on one side of her, and Dad stretched out on the other. Neither of them said a word. Mom rested her hand on the dreaming Fortuna’s elbow, and for that one moment, I swore I could feel it on my own arm, a spot of warmth that faded all-too quickly.

When the other Fortuna made a sound of distress, Mom pulled sweat-dampened hair away from her forehead and began to hum. Unlike Naevys, my mother couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket, but that didn’t matter. The

sound floated through the cave like a spell. Young Fortuna went still, and her eyes stopped fluttering. Asleep at last.

I waited, but nothing else happened. The other Fortuna slumbered on, cradled in between her sleeping parents. This was it, I realized, staring at the three figures. This was the entire memory. It had been significant enough, painful enough, to tuck away here where I'd probably never have found it on my own. This night must've taken place before Tamar bound my magic. My parents couldn't stop the bad dreams, so they'd helped me in the only way they knew how.

"They loved you, Fortuna," Oliver said softly, his voice coming from behind. "Whatever their faults, whatever they did when you were a child, their love for you was genuine."

Despite the warmth in my chest, I was frowning. It seemed too convenient, the fact that he had discovered this memory at the same time I was agonizing over my parents and everything I'd learned about them.

"How did you find this?" I asked without looking at him. My voice was too casual.

"It was years ago," Oliver said softly, confirming my suspicions. "We were children. At first, it was because I didn't understand what I was seeing. When I did figure out that it was connected to you, somehow, I had no idea how to get you down here. I didn't even know my own name, much less how to communicate about this."

It felt like I'd stumbled upon a second memory in this cave. My lips parted in a shocked daze. "That's right," I breathed. "At the beginning, you didn't even know how to speak. I forgot about that."

As the words left my mouth, the Oliver in front of me blurred with the Oliver from my past.

After my parents died, I had found myself in a vivid dream one night. Within that dream, during my wanderings, I'd spotted a towheaded boy hiding behind an enormous oak tree. Our tree, as it would become later. The vivid dream had happened again, and again, and again. Every time I opened my eyes, the strange boy was there, waiting with a shy smile. I remembered the sign language I'd learned just so I could have a conversation with him. He had picked up on it remarkably quickly, and soon, the boy hadn't needed the hand signals—he began speaking English as if he'd never had any trouble in the first place. After that, he'd moved on to being able to manipulate the dream itself.

Eventually there came a day when I accepted the place wasn't just a vivid dream. That was the day I gave the boy a name. *Ollie.*

"…after I'd developed the ability to communicate," the boy was saying now. Not so much a boy anymore, though. The sound of his voice brought my mind back to the present. "But by then, I didn't want you to see it. I thought it would make you sad, and I wanted to protect you from feeling that way here. Ever. As time went on, and we got older, it became one of my secrets. I thought that if I showed it to you, you'd hate me for hiding it."

He fell silent, and his jaw clenched as he waited for my response. I stared at him, realizing what this meant—Oliver had known, at least in part, about the existence of these memories. He'd known for *years* and kept it from me.

Door hinges whined into the stillness between us. I turned back and watched my parents walk toward the bed. The memory was beginning anew, I realized faintly. No matter how good it was, I didn't want to watch again. It hurt too much. "How do you get out of here?" I asked Oliver. "Climbing back up doesn't seem like an option."

Pain shone from his eyes. He probably thought my silence was out of anger, and I wasn't certain he was wrong.

"It's not," was all Oliver said. "We have to jump. But I know these waters—there aren't any rocks below this cave."

Without hesitation, I strode past the scene in my childhood bedroom and returned to the cliff's edge. I stared down at the waves below, trying to make out any shapes in the depths, but there wasn't quite enough light yet. Seconds later, Oliver's shoes appeared next to my bare feet. I could feel him looking at me, wondering if I'd reach for his hand. This was our tradition and I had never wavered from it, not even after a big fight.

It had started when Oliver discovered his ability to influence reality. Or reality as he knew it, at least. The memory replayed as vividly in my head as the one we'd witnessed moments ago.

"I think I can do anything," young Oliver had whispered to me beneath a velvet sky of stars. I think we could jump off that cliff, right now, and I'd be able to make the water feel like landing on a bunch of pillows.

Nine-year-old Fortuna had cocked her head and thought about this. "Let's find out," she decided.

Before Oliver could respond, she leaped to her feet and ran. He caught up within seconds, of course, his gangly legs easily overtaking hers. They reached the edge at the same time, waving skinny arms to catch their balance. They looked at each other, eyes bright from the thrill of our daring. Coming to an unspoken agreement, the younger versions of us started counting together. "One… two… three!"

Our delighted screams echoed through my head, and I blinked the memory back. After a moment, I refocused on the dusk-covered waves at the bottom of the world. I didn't reach for Oliver's hand or count.

I just jumped.

It didn't feel like pillows this time, and the water wasn't warm like it used to be. It wasn't freezing, either. Without the magic that had once made this place so special, it was just… seawater. Oliver landed beside me, and before he broke the surface, I started swimming toward the closest strip of land I could see. The ocean lapped at my chin and roared in my ears. Oliver caught up with me easily, just as he'd been doing all our lives, and sunlight bounced off his wet hair.

Minutes later, we hauled ourselves onto the beach. My clothes clung to my body, which ached from fighting the currents. I'd barely been here an hour and I already longed for sleep. Giving in to the feeling, I sank down onto a dry patch of sand and released a heavy breath. Oliver's footsteps halted. He stood there for a few seconds, then slowly moved to sit beside me. He rested his elbows on his knees and peered out at the horizon. I wrapped my arms around my legs.

Together and apart, we watched the sky give itself over to light and color. My drenched clothes and sea-sprayed skin cooled with every passing minute. I must've shivered, because Oliver suddenly pulled his sweater over his head and held it out to me. I accepted without looking at him, and as it settled on my shoulders, his familiar scent assailed my senses. A pang of nostalgia and sorrow hit me.

"In the cave, you said that was 'one of my secrets,'" I said softly, still not looking at Oliver. "Do you have others?"

He threw a pinch of sand at the horizon. "Everyone has secrets, Fortuna."

At this, I finally turned to him. I opened my mouth to argue… before I realized that he was right. Even now, despite my efforts to be honest with Oliver, there were things I had withheld. I faced the skyline again and

decided to let him keep his secrets, just as he let me keep mine. At least he'd had the courage to share one of his tonight, and he did it knowing there might be a cost.

The sun rose, driving away what remained of the moon and stars, but for once I didn't mind. There was something to be said for sitting in the light of day after spending so much time in the dark. It gradually banished the shadows inside me, until even the anger had dissipated, too. Sighing, I leaned my head on Oliver's shoulder and enjoyed the subtle warmth of morning on my skin.

Neither of us tried to broach the silence again. I didn't ask Oliver if he still loved me, and he didn't tell me that he wished things were different. I thought of the memory I'd regained in the cave, and an image filled my mind of young Oliver, peering out from behind our tree with frightened eyes. Those two children no longer existed. We'd grown up. We'd changed. I didn't know what our future looked like, but tomorrow didn't exist, anyway. There was only now.

As if he were agreeing, Oliver pressed a kiss to my forehead.

And now is so beautiful, I thought.

I woke to someone tapping my nose.

At first, it was easy to ignore. Within seconds, though, the touch became more insistent. Eventually it forced me back to full consciousness, and pulling my mind from the darkness felt like tugging my foot out of a thick patch of mud. I couldn't open my eyes. Not yet.

Despite this, I knew straight away that I was no longer in the dreamscape—I could smell the distinct tang of hair dye. The tapping hadn't stopped, either. I scowled and yanked the covers over me, but this didn't deter Emma, of course. There was a faint *click* in the stillness, and light streamed through my eyelids. I made an intelligible, furious sound Emma didn't acknowledge.

"Up and at 'em, sweetheart. You've been asleep for fourteen hours!" she said. I listened to her bustle across the room and open the curtains. "Gil and Lyari both stopped by last night. Not together, of course. Lyari

isn’t fond of vampires, is she? Finn, either. Poor Gilbert, it’s not as though he can help it.”

“Why do you hate me?” I mumbled, finally lowering the covers. My eyelids were heavy and reluctant. Once they were open, my vision clear, the first thing I saw was the sky. It was starless, as though the world was wearing a black shroud.

“Funny, isn’t it, how love can be so easily mistaken for hate?” Emma mused, walking past the bed again.

I sighed, wondering how much weed she’d smoked. A glance at the alarm clock revealed that it was barely six a.m. “It’s too early for this, Ems.”

The old woman stood on the threshold now. She wore her usual robe and slippers, but today her head was covered in a shower cap. I couldn’t see which color she’d chosen through the patterned plastic. “I woke you for two reasons,” Emma responded, ticking them off on her fingers. “One, you need to eat and hydrate. You may be descended from angels, but you still have human needs, my girl. Two, you have another visitor this morning, and he was very insistent. He’s on Cyrus’s porch. I tried to get him to come in, but he wasn’t having it. Stubborn, that one.”

Someone was waiting for me on Cyrus’s porch? Emma left before I could ask questions, but the affection in her voice had been unmistakable. It was also telling that Finn hadn’t bothered to get up from his bed in front of the fireplace, I thought as I followed Emma through the doorway.

To confirm my suspicions, I moved to the window at the end of the hall. It wasn’t quite as dark as I’d thought upon waking—there was a smudge of color on the horizon, the weakest of yellows, like the artist painting today’s sunrise had dipped their paintbrush in water before putting the bristles to canvas. Using this light, feeble as it was, I spotted a silhouette straight away. It was tall, slender, and familiar. Wings fluttered in my chest.

Retreating, I glanced down at what I’d fallen asleep in. My visitor would have to wait a big longer. Realizing that I hadn’t brushed my teeth in fourteen hours, I rushed to the bathroom. The hunger pangs started while I was in there, proving Emma right for what felt like the millionth time. *Later*, I promised myself, thinking of the person on that porch.

Once I was dressed, my long hair scraped back into a ponytail, I moved toward the stairwell. As I went, I reached out with my senses, borrowing

some of Finn’s power to enhance my own. Nym was in his room, pacing and muttering under his breath. Damon, Danny, and Matthew were still sleeping, their breathing deep and their heartbeats steady. Lyari wasn’t asleep, from what I could tell, but she was also in her room. Emma was in the bathroom, humming to herself while water ran into the sink.

It had become habit, checking on my family every morning. Even though we’d beaten Belanor, and the immediate danger had passed, I was afraid for them. I’d made too many enemies. It would never be completely safe for the people I loved, which meant I always needed to be on guard.

Reassured that all was well, I lifted my coat off the hook. Its weight settled upon my shoulders while I hurried down the steps and out the other door. Seconds later, I emerged into the frozen morning, immediately seeking that bright figure with my gaze. He wasn’t looking back at me. Something about his profile made me uneasy, or maybe it was his posture. He never stood that stiffly. Frowning now, I crossed the short distance between the barn and the house, then ascended the familiar, time-beaten steps.

At the other end of the porch, Laurie stood with his back to me. He was dressed in a flawlessly-tailored white suit, his hair a splash of brilliance in the solemn dawn. He wore his crown again, the same one I’d seen on Belanor’s head when I first awoke in the palace. The lit end of a cigarette set Laurie’s hand aglow.

Seeing it brought another conversation to mind. I drew closer and imagined Collith standing next to Laurie, his back to me, too, just as it had been when I’d come upon them the night Naevys died.

I thought you quit.

I only indulge myself when the sorrow is too much to bear.

“Are you just going to stare at it?” I asked finally, knowing the suddenness of my question wouldn’t startle him. Laurie would’ve heard the door open, heard every footstep I took. I walked down the length of the porch and halted at his side. The view from this side of the house wasn’t anything significant—it was only the garage and a line of naked trees.

“I don’t like the way they make my breath smell,” Laurie replied without turning. His voice was absent. Keeping his focus on those distant trees, my friend tapped the cigarette with his usual fluidity. Sparks tumbled through the air and faded before they hit the ground. “Sometimes I just like to hold one.”

Oddly enough, learning this small thing about Laurie made him seem more human. I considered asking him what was wrong, but it was such an obvious question for people like us; our lives were an ever-turning wheel of chaos and turmoil. His twin brother had just died. Regardless of the relationship between them, that must've had an effect.

As I searched for a safe topic, I realized Laurie still hadn't told me why he was here. I was about to breach the silence again when he said, "I'm returning to the Seelie Court today, and I'm afraid you won't see me for a while."

My first instinct was to argue with him. I didn't believe the war was over, not like Laurie seemed to. Belanor had just been a tool. A weapon. His wielder was still out there somewhere.

My second instinct, which hit while I was still fighting the first, was pain. *Laurie is leaving*. The thought felt like a piece of debris lodging in my heart. It meant something that he'd come here so formally, spoken with such uncharacteristic reserve.

Laurie was saying goodbye.

But I didn't say any of this out loud. I allowed the tension to linger between us for another moment or two, waiting for my emotions to settle like the final gust of a storm. When I deemed it safe to speak again, my voice was calm, revealing nothing of the wreckage inside me. "How long is 'a while,' in the mind of a faerie?"

Twisting his lips in thought, Laurie tossed the cigarette with a flick of his long fingers. The wooden boards beneath our feet were protected by a layer of ice, so there was no risk of causing damage as he put the embers out beneath his boot. "Rest assured," Laurie said, grinding the bits of light with his heel, "it won't be in terms of years. I still owe you a boon. Also, *someone* needs to make sure you remember what an orgasm is."

It hadn't been too long ago a comment like that would've made me snort. To hide the effect it had on me now—it felt like the parts of my body that he'd touched, kissed, and licked came alive, tingling and throbbing—I rolled my eyes. "Oh, you think you're just so funny, don't you?"

"Incorrect. I *know* I'm funny." Laurie winked. He reached forward and rested some of his weight on the porch banister, entirely unbothered by the snow against his bare skin.

I tried to smile, but I couldn’t. My gaze dropped down to where we both gripped the railing, our hands inches apart. Why did the distance feel like so much more, though?

“I’ll miss you.” I said it quietly, like a confession. Strange that I should be afraid to say three such simple words when Laurie had seen all of me. Not just my body, but all the rest—the good, the bad, the murderous. He knew my thoughts before I did, sometimes. So of course he already knew that I’d miss him.

And yet, despite knowing the truth, Laurie hadn’t expected to hear me say it. Startled, he finally met my gaze. Now that he’d faced the horizon, his skin was tinted gold from the rising sun and strands of his hair caught the light. His Dondarte eyes weren’t just silver, I discovered as I tipped my head back. There were thin, delicate strands of blue tucked within the starlight. How had I never noticed it before?

“Don’t look at me like that,” Laurie said hoarsely.

Heat spread through my lower stomach. *Fire. You’re playing with fire, Fortuna,* that inner voice cautioned. For good reason, too—I’d been burned so many times. Laurie had scars of his own. To protect both of us, I needed to change the subject. Steer the conversation back into safe territory.

Instead, I heard myself ask, “Why not?”

Laurie stood very, very still. He searched my face, and whatever he saw there made his gaze intensify. The mask he’d been wearing cracked, letting me see the vulnerable male beneath.

“Because it gives me hope,” Laurie said. The truth of his feelings for me shone from his eyes.

If we’d been playing with fire before, we may as well have been surrounded by it now. My eyes fell to Laurie’s lips, and I couldn’t help it—I thought about leaning forward. Kissing him how he’d kissed me at the Unseelie Court. Kissing him in the way I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about since we’d spent the day in that enormous, rumpled bed framed with velvet curtains.

I began to raise my hand, on the verge of bringing Laurie’s face down to mine.

Wait, I thought. My hand faltered. There was a reason I’d been resisting this, and being near Laurie always seemed to make me forget. But I remembered now—I couldn’t give him hope when there was none.

Not for us. And it wasn't because he was a faerie, or because the memory of Collith always seemed to be standing between us.

My gaze left Laurie's, rising to the crown resting on his head.

If I opened this door with him, it would lead to the Seelie Court. To a life I'd been so eager to leave that I'd handed Viessa Folduin the throne without thinking about any of the consequences. Oh, Laurie would promise me that we could keep it separate, of course. We'd make grand promises about our future together. But I knew the demands of sitting on that throne. The heart of the matter was that Laurie didn't fit in my world, and I didn't fit in his.

Wishing I could avoid what came next, I swallowed and looked away, finally breaking our heated stare. "When is your coronation?" was all I said.

Laurie paused, and in that moment, as the potential of us shriveled, I swore I could feel his hope dying, too. Then he removed his hands from the railing and shoved them in his pockets. The air felt colder, somehow, even as the sun continued to climb. "Tonight," he answered.

"Wow. You're not wasting any time." I bit my lip and looked down at our feet. The movement drew my attention to a tiny glow that didn't belong. One of the embers from Laurie's cigarette hadn't quite gone out yet. I put the tip of my boot on it and dragged the spot of light backward.

I was still looking down at the ashes, the smear of black left behind when he remarked, "You're judging me."

For once, Laurie was wrong—I didn't begrudge him for taking back his throne. If it made him happy, that was the most important thing. But I saw his comment for the opportunity it was. Crushing my pain like I'd crushed that ember, I shrugged and gave Laurie a mocking grin. "Yeah, well, it's a hobby of mine."

"Indeed it is." Smiling faintly, Laurie turned his head again and squinted at the brightening skyline. "Perhaps you should ask the child's witchy mother to put a new protection spell on this land. Your enemies seem to grow by the day, and next time one comes knocking, even I may not be quick enough to save you."

"Don't worry about me, Laur. I can take care of myself. Just focus on that wicked Court of yours… and don't turn your back on Sorcha."

I spoke with an air of finality, because I expected him to sift halfway through my sentence. Avoiding goodbyes as he so often did. But Laurie

stayed where he was, standing on this cold porch. Still silent, he took off the crown and held it in his palms. Seeing him remove his crown was like watching the sun rise in the west or witnessing rain falling upward.

"I allowed myself to get distracted," Laurie said abruptly.

I frowned, waiting for him to continue. But he didn't—he just kept staring at that crown, his jaw clenched. It took me another second to understand. By me, Laurie meant. He'd been *distracted* by his feelings for me. I'd just been a diversion, a momentary inconvenience that had almost made him lose what he truly wanted.

Laurie's revelation stung. In spite of this, I didn't get angry. Instead, I studied his detached expression and thought of that little boy from his memories. Scared. Lonely. The throne had become all he dreamed about. The reason for everything. The purpose for his pain.

Collith looked at the throne and saw potential and obligation. Laurie looked at it and saw identity and fate.

The spell on Creiddylad's tomb had demanded sacrifice. It had learned Laurie's secrets through his blood, and it hadn't taken his sister, or his beauty, or his immortality. No, the magic had taken his throne.

Everyone had a weakness. Everyone had something they would kill for and die for.

I now knew what Laurelis Dondarte's was. To my utter shame, I felt my mind latch onto this with the same cunning and ferocity I'd seen in Gwyn's eyes. It was as if the Unseelie Queen was a separate being that I shared a body with. It was she who wondered how we could use a powerful creature's weakness to our own advantage.

For the thousandth time, the silver-haired faerie standing next to me smiled as if he knew exactly what I was thinking. His eyes glittered in a way that was all-too familiar. Just like that, he was Laurie again. My friend, my sparring partner, my arrogant protector. "You've become more like us than you want to admit, Lady Sworn," he said. "I didn't think it was possible for you to get sexier, but here you are, surprising me once again."

The breath caught in my throat, and I knew even that small sound would reveal too much to Laurie. Thankfully, he was no longer there to hear it. I stood alone on the porch now, aching in more ways than one. I wrapped my arm around the wooden beam next to me and leaned my temple against it, sighing. A single gust of air curled through the dapples of frost-edged sunlight.

“I forgot something.”

The sound of Laurie’s voice made me jump. I turned, opening my mouth to ask him what he’d forgotten. Before I could say a word, he was there in a rush of warmth and heady scent.

His kiss was sudden, thorough, and just the right amount of rough. As I kissed him back, Laurie’s hands slid into my hair and became fists. Claiming me. Ruining me. Despite the cruel things he’d just said—that I was a distraction, a desire second best to the throne he so longed to return to—my hands went up of their own volition, pressing on the firm planes of his back to pull him even closer. Our bodies pressed together from chest to thigh, and I could feel Laurie’s arousal against me, evoking images of a crackling fire, its lights and shadows flickering over our bare skin. I forgot where we were or that someone could look out the window and see us. All I could think about was Laurie. His tongue, his hands, his cock. *Laurie*.

Only when my lips felt bruised, my clit pulsing with unsatiated need, did he truly disappear. The instant I felt the pressure of his mouth pull away, my eyes flew open. The porch was empty, just as I’d known it would be.

“Fuck you,” I whispered, but the hurt in my voice gave the words a different meaning.

At that moment, Emma’s comment came back to me. *Funny, isn’t it, how love can be so easily mistaken for hate?*

It wasn’t a mistake, I thought, staring out at the horizon. It would be impossible to mistake these feelings for hate or anger. I was certain of it, and that certainty was the reason why my own fear filled the air. Anyone who defined this feeling as hate wasn’t making a mistake… because people *chose* hate. It was so much easier. Love was painful. Love was *terrifying*.

As if I was trying to escape it, I retreated from the railing, turned, and launched off the porch.

And I ran.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Dawn broke through the trees just as sweat began seeping through my track jacket.

Finn ran ahead of me, his white and gray tail swishing back and forth like a duster. There was a rabbit here somewhere, its footprints zigzagging over freshly-fallen snow. I caught another glimpse of Finn darting between two trees in pursuit of the small creature. His ears were perked, his body stiff with readiness.

It was the happiest I had seen him since we'd ripped a demon out of his tired, battered body.

That had been four days ago. Three days ago, we'd killed Belanor. And two days ago… two days ago Laurie had said his goodbyes on the porch.

No. Focus on something else. As I sprinted through the snow, my sides aching with effort, I thought further back than the past four days. I quickly realized this was a mistake when I found myself back in that sandy arena, listening to the crowd cry for my death. Then, in a blink, I was trapped in a white cell. Another blink, and the red glow of a brand was coming closer.

The panic hit me like it had all happened yesterday. On the riverbank, in the same spot where Finn and I had once battled those strange creatures —those strange creatures *I* had created, a fact which I hadn't let myself think about this week—I stopped and bent over, bracing my hands against my knees. Only one thought pounded at me now, beating in my ears like a second heartbeat.

I wanted a drink. God, I wanted a drink.

No. Focus on something else. I straightened and did my dad's breathing techniques. Slowly, my mind began to clear. I became aware of Finn, who

stood so close that our breath collided in the air. The instant our gazes met, he let out a low whine. My friend must've felt what was happening through the bond.

"I'm okay," I told him. "Really, Finn, I'm fine."

Apparently the werewolf didn't believe me, because when I walked away from the river, he stayed within reach. I was back in control, though. Instead of memories, I filled my head with the same thought I'd been having on every morning run lately. *What do I want to do next?* For what felt like the first time in years, the days loomed before me, free of obligation or danger. I'd been working my way through a list, staying busy every hour that I was awake and had no Oliver to distract me, as he'd been doing all week. There were still several things I hadn't gotten to. Research veterinary programs. Laundry. Pay a visit to Nym. I needed to see Bea, as well.

Bea.

With Belanor dead, I knew I should go to the bar and ask for my job back, but something kept stopping me—an image that popped into my head every time I imagined how the conversation would go. I couldn't keep working for Bea and lying to her, so asking for my job back meant telling her the truth about Fallenkind. About me.

Bea was a human who saw the world in black and white, though. There were no shades of gray. If I revealed the world she didn't see, she might look at the real me with… fear.

That was the image I couldn't shut out.

Tomorrow. I'll talk to Bea tomorrow. Shame intermingled with relief, but not enough to change my decision. With Finn at my side, I turned in the direction of home. The adrenaline rattling through me had begun to slow, and suddenly the wintry air was painful, rather than refreshing. Shivering, I shoved my hands in my pockets, then twitched in surprise when something pressed against my knuckles. I frowned and pulled a small card out, its hard surface partially bent now. *Jacob Goldmann*.

It was the potential contact Dracula had given me. I thought back to the day I'd taken this card from the vampire's fingers, and his silken voice whispered through my memory.

Most of what my contacts know about Nightmares comes from stories that have been passed down. But there was one who said he'd be willing to

speak with you—he was married to a Nightmare, many years ago, until she was killed.

Excitement made me halt. Why hadn't I ever used this information? I'd never even called the number. Had it been circumstance… or cowardice?

Sensing the shift in my mood, Finn moved to stand in front of me. I tried to send a warm rush of reassurance down the bond, but I was still gazing down at the card. Considering the consequences of using it. Because if Goldmann was truly able to help me, if he had any helpful information at all, it could change everything. I might be able to repeat what I'd done at the river and in my bedroom as a child. Except this time, someone could actually benefit from it.

Ollie.

Since learning the truth about my abilities, I'd been stalling. Doing anything to avoid thinking about the true extent of what I was capable of. Not because it prompted the memory of the binding spell, or the fear in my parents' eyes, but out of pure selfishness.

The truth was… if I set Oliver free and gave him a life in this world, he'd never be able to return to ours. The one we'd created together. For seventeen years, the dreamscape had been my haven. A place where everything made sense and nothing bad could happen. To lose that would feel like losing a part of myself. Because Ollie *was* that place. Without him, it was nothing but a gray horizon and a few blades of grass.

But he deserved better. Oliver had spent his entire life putting my needs ahead of his own, tucking his dreams away to protect me from mine. Slowly, I reached into my other pocket and pulled out the feather he'd given me. The feather I'd barely thought about, since Finn had been possessed. Maybe I'd allowed myself to forget about it. I stared down at my hands, wavering.

I'd already given in to fear once today. There wouldn't be a second time.

I took a steadying breath, pulled my phone out, and unlocked the screen. Without letting myself think about it, I typed Goldmann's number in and called it. Finn spotted another rabbit, and he turned from me to watch its every movement.

"I'm sorry, but the person you called has a voice mailbox that has not been set up yet. Goodbye."

Of course. I lowered the phone and stared at it, my lips twisted in thought. Still holding the card in my other hand, I traced the letters of Goldmann's name with the tip of my thumb. An idea took hold. Unlocking my phone again, I typed the area code into a search engine. It was from a small town in Florida.

I lifted my head, chewing my lower lip in thought. After a few seconds, I realized I was staring in the direction of the Unseelie Court. Or, more specifically, the Door that could take me anywhere in the world.

Purpose filled my veins, better than any cocktail or endorphin rush. I knew what I was going to do today.

Finn moved into my line of sight, forcefully reminding me of his presence. I'd been so deep in thought that I'd half-forgotten him and where I was. Worry trickled from his mind and there was a question in his round, bright eyes.

"I have an errand to run," I told him. "I'd love some company, if you're interested in taking a cross-country trip. It won't take more than a couple hours… probably."

Finn's response was to turn around and lope up a shallow hill. He paused at the top and cocked his head. *Are you coming?*

His voice sounded within my skull, and a violent jolt of shock went through me. Finn's words were as clear as they would be if we were speaking on the phone. I hadn't known the Blood Vow, as he'd called it, could make this possible. Gil had never tried it. Being bonded to another creature was entirely new to him. But Finn…

Finn was a werewolf. He was pack. Speaking to someone else without saying a single word out loud was what felt right to him. What felt normal. I could feel the new confidence emanating from Finn's being, shining like a newborn star. He hadn't even asked what kind of errand we were on, I realized as I watched him sprint ahead again. I wrapped my arms around myself and followed the trail he created through the snow.

My plan was simple. Jacob Goldmann lived in a small town, and small towns tended to have dive bars. Dive bars still had things like payphones and phonebooks. It was a long shot, but I'd search every phonebook I could find for Jacob Goldmann's address. If he wouldn't answer my calls, then I'd just drop by. Dracula wouldn't connect me with someone who was dangerous.

Would he?

If I thought about it too much, I'd probably talk myself out of going. Now that I'd faced my fear, I was suddenly desperate to learn more about my abilities. Every day that passed was another day Oliver could've been here. I was still anxious about how bringing him out of the dreamscape would affect both of us, but that didn't matter. We'd figure it out. I would do whatever it took to help Oliver experience the life he deserved.

A fresh surge of resolve quickened my pace. I didn't give a thought to stopping at the house for a shower or a change of clothes, and by the time I arrived at that familiar crack in the ground, a fresh layer of cold sweat clung to my skin. I ignored it and rushed headlong into the darkness.

Fortuna, Finn said. I spun, startled again, and saw that he'd stopped in the mouth of the tunnel.

"Oh, sorry. You have no idea where we're going," I blurted, rushing back to him. Breathing hard, I knelt and held my phone in front of Finn's whiskered face, showing him images from the Google search I'd done on Goldmann's area code. The werewolf sneezed, stood, and trotted down the passageway. I hurried to follow.

Though Nuvian always had Guardians stationed near the surface, no one bothered us as we used the Door. I squeezed my eyes shut and pictured the town where I hoped to find the answers to so many questions. Moments later, Finn and I stepped into a sunny, busy street.

The door to a movie theater closed behind us. We looked around in unison, taking in this place that may as well have been on another planet for how different it was from Granby. A trolley glided past, its sides painted in red and yellow. Heat shimmered over the pavement and there were no mountains in sight. Palm trees cast fringed shadows over the sidewalk. Everyone within sight wore summery clothes in bright colors.

There was a bar next door, and it looked exactly like the sort of place that would still have a phonebook. Finn had either put together what I was doing from the voicemail he'd heard, or he just didn't care—knowing him, it was probably the latter—and his nails clicked as he trailed after me. I stepped toward the entrance of the bar, then paused. I eyed the enormous werewolf taking up most of the sidewalk, and he looked back with his usual stoicism.

"Maybe you should stay here," I suggested, speaking aloud out of habit. Nightmares caught people's notice everywhere we went, but whenever I had Finn with me, the stares got even worse. The locals might

be less willing to share information if their minds were bouncing between lust and terror.

Without a word, Finn loped over to a patch of lawn in front of a boutique store. He planted himself next to the white-framed sign that read, LILY'S LOVELY LINGERIE. I pressed my lips together and turned away quickly, knowing he'd hear it if I laughed.

I was still smiling when I pushed the warped door open. I was greeted by a gust of cool air, and floorboards squeaked underfoot as I entered a small, dim room. An air conditioner whirred in the window. It was busier than I expected for noon on a weekday—several of the booths were full, and two of the high tops. I saw several people glance my way, a look that was probably meant to be cursory until my magic took hold.

Most of the conversations in the room slowed, then halted altogether.

Wishing I'd thought to bring the goblin ring, I scanned the space with a neutral expression. I was careful to avoid eye contact with anyone, since that tended to encourage them and I'd prefer to avoid human interaction if possible. Just as I'd hoped, I soon spotted a payphone in a narrow hallway. A thick stack of paper rested on top of it, the top cover curling at its edges. *Bingo*. I hurried toward it and flipped through the white pages as fast as I could.

No Jacob Goldmanns.

I left as swiftly as I'd come. A round-cheeked man had been moving to speak with me, and he opened his mouth to say something, but I slipped through the door before he could say a single word. Finn was already standing there when I emerged into the open again. Neither of us spoke as we walked to the second bar. Once again, I entered alone, and it felt like I'd stumbled onto a memory playing in a loop. Heads turned, eyes widened, conversations stopped. I ignored them and searched this room, too. There were no payphones in sight.

Damn it. Now I had to talk to a local. Swallowing a resigned sigh, I turned to the bartender, who'd frozen mid-scrub. He looked like a walking dictionary definition of a surfer—long hair, tanned skin, shell necklace.

"Do you have a phonebook anywhere?" I asked politely.

Using that tone had the effect I'd been aiming for, and the boy blinked. Watching him regather his composure was like watching an old computer reboot. He cleared his throat, raking his blond hair back. "Yeah. Yes, we do. Just… just hold on a second."

“Thanks.” I sank onto one of the stools and forced my hands to unclench. I’d forgotten how powerful the Nightmare’s influence could be. So much of my time had been spent in Granby, where most of the humans were accustomed to me, or amongst the fae, who viewed extraordinary beauty as commonplace. Now I remembered why I’d left Denver at the earliest opportunity.

Surfer Boy had barely taken four steps when I felt someone sidle up next to me. The tension I’d just managed to ease came back in a rush.

“No,” I said, staring at the rows of bottles adorning the wall across from where I sat.

In my peripheral vision, I saw the man raise his hands in the air. He was wearing a gold ring on every finger, and they gleamed in the weak light. “Oh, hey, look, I didn’t mean anything by coming over here, I was just—”

“No.” Still not bothering to turn my head, I sent a whisper of my power to him, coiling its essence around his body like a snake about to strike. The man stammered out an apology and retreated so hastily that his heel slammed into the leg of a stool. He fell onto his ass and crawled backward. After a few awkward scuttles, his bare hands slapping the tiles, the man whirled and scrambled to his feet. His sneakers squeaked as he hurried out the door.

If people weren’t staring before, they definitely were now. I gritted my teeth to hold back a curse. *Smart, Fortuna. Real smart.* I caught sight of my reflection in the glass, and the face looking back was troubled. The fear I saw had nothing to do with all the eyes boring into my back, though. Truthfully, it had been too easy, doing that to the human just now—I’d destroyed him with barely more than an impulse. Sitting there, I heard Dad’s voice again, his worry echoing across the years. *Her power grows by the day.*

What if history was repeating itself? What if I lost control of this power I didn’t fully understand?

God, I wanted a drink. Jacob Goldmann. I was here for a Jacob Goldmann. I focused on the thought like a prayer.

Luckily, the bartender came back a few seconds later with a pamphlet-sized phonebook. This really was a small town, I thought as I noted the limited number of pages. I made sure to take it from the bartender without smiling. *Don’t want to give the poor kid a heart attack.*

The pages were so old that the rows of ink had started to fade. Determined, I leaned closer, skimming the column of names with the barest touch. I found the one I wanted within moments, and my finger stilled on the page. With my rapid heartbeat pounding in my ears, I typed the address into a GPS app. My heart quickened even more at the results—Dracula's mysterious contact was only four blocks away.

I dropped the phonebook onto the bar and jumped down from the stool.

"Thanks again," I said, nodding at Surfer Boy. He stared at me, open-mouthed, and didn't even attempt a response this time.

I returned to the haze of heat, where I discovered my huge, scary-looking werewolf getting his fur yanked at by a toddler. Finn didn't move or flinch, and the boy babbled at him happily, a bubble of spit appearing at the corner of his rosebud mouth.

"It's four blocks away," I told Finn, giving him a knowing look. He was loving this.

The boy's mother rushed up a moment later. Her eyes widened when she saw what he was doing. "Is that a—" she started.

Before I could answer, Finn gently disengaged himself from those dimpled fists and strode off. Making a strangled sound of relief, the woman snatched up her child and bolted in the opposite direction. I followed Finn, suppressing another smile. I couldn't exactly blame the human for thinking her son was about to get eaten—I'd just realized there was blood on Finn's teeth from the rabbit he killed earlier.

Once I caught up with him, Finn didn't leave my side. He kept us at a brisk clip, though, his tongue lolling out one side of his mouth. His buoyancy made me feel lighter, too. I knew what he was feeling, just as he could sense my own emotions and thoughts. Finn and I had been to Hell and back, but here we were, surrounded by palm trees and birdsong. Sunlight beating down on our heads and a warm breeze slipping past. I couldn't imagine how hot Finn was under all that fur. Well, I *could* now that I had access to his mind, but I didn't want to.

Using the bonds still made me feel guilty. I'd never say it out loud, but I regretted making the connections with Gil, Finn, and soon, Lyari. All of them were attached to me not by choice, but necessity.

For most of my life, I'd questioned people's love for me and doubted their sincerity when they wanted me. Now three of the closest people in

my life would be no different, except their minds were being influenced by a spell instead of a Nightmare's allure.

Despite these dismal thoughts, I'd been reading the numbers on every mailbox we passed. At 1021, I stopped, tracing those painted white figures with my eyes. The house was tiny, its siding the color of damp sand. Every window had curtains drawn across it and the flower boxes were empty. The front yard was mowed in perfect rows, but beyond that, there was no outward sign that anyone actually lived here.

"Think we found it," I said, sounding as dejected as I felt.

Finn lifted his nose and smelled the air. *This place stinks of fear*, he said. At the sound of his voice, I jumped for what felt like the umpteenth time. It was going to take a while to get used to that. Once his words registered, hope returned in a rush.

"Would you mind waiting outside again?" I asked, staring at the house. If Jacob Goldmann was already in a state of constant anxiety, bringing a werewolf to his door didn't seem like a good idea.

Finn sat down in silent agreement. I knew he'd be inside within seconds if I needed him. I focused on the front door and let out a short, ragged breath. Why was I so nervous? If there *was* someone living here, the house looked ordinary enough. Then again, I knew better than anyone how deceiving appearances could be.

Oh, gee, maybe your anxiety has something to do with the fact you tracked down a total stranger, that inner voice pointed out. She was really starting to piss me off. I approached the door, and with each step, a quake went through me. The old Fortuna wouldn't have been so afraid, and I had Belanor to thank for this new caution. He may have been dead, but my memories of him were as permanent as the scar on my back. What if this entire venture was one of Dracula's tricks?

But I couldn't walk away now. I'd come too far. Thinking of everything that was at stake—learning more about my abilities as a Nightmare could teach me how to control them, to harness them well enough to bring Oliver over into reality—I forced myself to raise a fist and knock.

A minute passed, and no one came. A car drove down the street. Somewhere overhead, a crow's harsh, raucous call echoed through the air. Hesitantly, I knocked again, louder now. "Hello? Is anyone home?"

This time, footsteps creaked on the other side. Ten more seconds ticked by, as if the owner of this house was hoping I'd give up and leave. I didn't budge. When the door opened, the sound the hinges made had the cadence of a sigh. I lifted my head, preparing to blurt the awkward explanation I'd come up with during the walk here.

When I saw who was standing in front of me, though, my jaw slackened. Whatever I was about to say just… faded.

I knew him.

He'd been in one of the memories I'd found in the dreamscape. The man who'd opened that red door and whose wife had helped to put a binding spell on me as a child. He was older now, much older, with deep lines across his forehead and around his mouth, his hair gone gray at the edges. But it was him.

He recognized me, too—terror filled the space between us.

My instincts stirred, drawn to it like a beast to its prey. I resisted the hunt by picturing them. My anchors, the faces of people I loved. I regained control within moments. Or most of it, at least. I managed to form a coherent string of baffled thoughts. Was this an extraordinary coincidence? Or had Dracula known, somehow, that Jacob Goldmann and I met each other in another life?

"My name is Fortuna," I said when the silence became a beat too long. "I got your information from… someone who thought you could help me."

Other questions battered at my control, and only caution kept me from saying them out loud. *Why are you so frightened? Why aren't you saying anything? Why did Dracula lead me to you?*

Oblivious to the hornet's nest buzzing within my skull, Jacob glanced up and down the street. There was nothing welcoming in his tone as he replied, "I think I know which friend you're referring to. Would you like to come in? I just made a pot of fresh coffee."

"Sure. Thank you." I stepped over the threshold, trying to hide my trepidation, and Jacob immediately closed the door behind me. Rigid with nerves, I tried to note every detail as the man stepped around me. My unease worsened when I quickly discovered there weren't many details to find. There was a closet to my right, and coat hooks across from it. Both were empty. There were also no framed pictures hanging up or immediate scents in the air.

"Should I take my shoes off?" I asked. My mind was still spinning.

Jacob continued down the hall. Without looking back he said, “No need.”

I moved to follow him, and in doing so, I passed an arched doorway. Light poured through it and spilled across my tennis shoes. A mezuzah hung on that slender piece of wall between hallway and living room. Besides this, there was still nothing else in sight to reveal who Jacob Goldmann was. Everything in front of me was nondescript—the brown furniture, the unadorned wooden floors, the white walls. It was as though he was a visitor to his own life.

I didn’t need to ask whether Tamar was here. From the looks of this house, she’d either left him or she was dead.

Refocusing, I turned and walked toward the doorway that obviously led to the kitchen. But when I reached it, there was no sign of Jacob. Frowning, I went right. A cluster of doors stood at the end of another short hallway, two of them open. I peered into each room. The first was a bedroom. The second was a bathroom.

Jacob was in that one, his body halfway out a window.

“What the hell are you doing?” I demanded. I reacted instinctively. Rushing over, I yanked at the back of Jacob’s wool sweater in an effort to pull him down. The loose material only stretched, exposing a long expanse of skin, and suddenly I found myself staring at marks on Jacob’s flesh. Marks I recognized instantly. It was a brand.

The same one that I wore on my own back.

In that instant, I became aware of two facts about Jacob Goldmann.

The first was that Jacob had met Belanor.

The second fact was what made my heart feel like an avalanche. Because there was only one reason Belanor would put that symbol on him. I’d been tortured because of it. Gil had lost his life for it. Belanor needed one final ingredient to complete the spell he was so obsessed with.

“You’re a Nightmare,” I breathed.

“The binding spell is gone,” Jacob said back with equal astonishment. I watched the surprise in his eyes give way to horror.

How did he know that? Frowning, my eyes went to the neckline of his sweater. It was lopsided and stretched. I realized what must've happened—when I'd pulled it down, my knuckles had brushed against Jacob's bare skin. However well-guarded I thought I was, he'd gotten a read on me.

Using my distraction to his advantage, Jacob shoved past and rushed down the hallway. I recovered quickly and followed him, pausing on the threshold of the bedroom he'd gone into. A single look told me it was exactly like the rest of the house—colorless and barren. Jacob slid a door open, revealing a closet, and he bent to retrieve something.

"How did you escape Belanor?" I asked bluntly.

At the sound of that name, the other Nightmare faltered. With his back to me, my gaze returned to that brand. It was out of sight, hidden beneath his sweater again. I could still see it, though, imprinted on my mind as permanently as the one on my shoulder.

Then Jacob straightened, seeming to reach some inner decision.

"You have to go." He stood and threw a suitcase on the bed. It looked like an antique from the 20s with its hard sides and striped tweed. Jacob yanked dresser drawers open and started shoving clothes into it. Apparently, now that I'd caught him, he'd decided there was enough time to pack before he undoubtedly fled again.

"Fine, yes, I'll go," I told him, a frantic edge in my voice. "I just want to know who's doing this. That's not too much to ask, is it? Maybe it'll help my chances of survival."

Jacob kept packing. "Only way to survive is run."

I watched him with clenched fists, fighting the childish urge to yank every piece of clothing out of that suitcase. What did all of this mean, exactly? How much did Jacob know about Belanor's master? Was it just a coincidence that our paths had crossed when I was a child?

Suddenly the ferry was beneath my feet and I saw that red door again, coming toward us in the cold night. I heard my father's voice, half-pleading, as mine was now. *There has to be a way to stop it. Here you are, standing in front of us.*

It felt like a flare brightened in my head and released a hiss of sparks. I sucked in a breath, rapidly filling in more parts of the story as bursts of comprehension went off.

I'd never understood what Dad had meant by that last part. I thought the words were directed at Tamar, the witch, but Matthew Sworn had been

talking to Jacob, the Nightmare. *Her power grows by the day,* he'd told them. That night, I had sensed his fear and misunderstood the cause of it.

My parents hadn't been scared *of* me. They'd been scared *for* me.

I didn't believe in coincidences, and there were too many happening here. I could finally see the truth. The mysterious figure that had been after me as a child and the one now controlling Belanor—they were one and the same. He'd gotten his mark on Jacob, but failed at finishing the spell on him.

Then I'd come along.

My parents had known there was someone searching for our kind. Searching for a Nightmare powerful enough to survive dark magic. Somehow, Dad had also learned that another Nightmare escaped. He'd found Jacob Goldmann and his wife and asked for their help.

The binding spell had been their solution. It was probably how Jacob escaped his fate and also how he'd remained hidden so many years from hunters, magic, and every other thing that went bump in the night.

Then I remembered Tamar's response to my dad, and I knew I was right. *The spell is painful for the one it's being performed on. Not only that, but being bound in magic that dark changes you. He can attest to it better than anyone.*

She'd looked at Jacob, a hint of guilt in her eyes.

All of this went through my head within seconds. Jacob was nearly finished packing now, every piece of clothing pulled off its hanger or removed from the chests. No wonder he was so consumed by fear—just as mine had been, his abilities were restrained and tucked away. He was a sitting duck to anyone that came after him, much less Belanor.

"Tell me who's after us," I demanded, instinctively glancing toward every window. The world looked calm. Nothing peered back through the glass. "What does the brand mean?"

Jacob shoved the suitcase clasps into place with his thumbs and picked it up by its long handle. I didn't move out of his way, but he darted around me, speaking frantically as he went. "It's his mark. It's the key. He just needs to find a Nightmare strong enough to withstand the spell. Your power is like a fucking beacon—you've probably led him right to me. Now I understand why your father was so desperate."

Another thread fit into place, lending the image more clarity. If power was like a beacon to the person that was after us, no wonder my parents

had gone into such a panic after I made that tree appear.

A hard, tight knot that had been living in my chest since seeing that memory began to loosen. *They weren't scared of me,* I thought again. I knew it wouldn't be the last time. The memory of my parents was beautifully, fully intact, and I'd probably need a few more reminders for that to really sink in.

"At least tell me what the spell is supposed to do," I blurted, following Jacob down the hall again. "We have time. Whatever you think is coming, I can take it. I can protect you. Hunters aren't—"

"You think our kind has been pushed to the brink of extinction because of *hunters*?" Snatching a hat off one of the hooks, Jacob uttered a short, panicked laugh. He jammed the hat on his head and removed his keys off a hook, too. They jangled and flashed in his hand as he turned.

"Enough with the dramatics," I snapped. Jacob threw the front door open and rushed headlong into the afternoon. I ran after him. "Just stop for one goddamn second and tell me what's going on!"

He unlocked the car manually and opened the back door to toss his suitcase in. I hovered next to him, standing on the paved driveway. I'd glimpsed Finn standing on the lawn, his posture stiff and alert, but I kept my focus on Jacob. I didn't want to make an enemy of him, not when his cooperation was so important.

Just as he tried to close the driver's side door, I rushed forward and grabbed the edge, stopping him.

"Please," I begged, not giving a shit about my pride, for once. "Did you know that my parents died right after we went to you and Tamar? I was eight years old. My brother and I grew up with humans who knew nothing about our kind or the shadow world. There's so much I don't know. All I'm asking for is an hour of your time, *please*."

I finally stopped rambling and waited for his response. My pulse thudded in my throat as I stood there, still holding the door in a white-knuckled grip. Jacob still wouldn't look at me; he kept his gaze on the steering wheel. There was a long, long pause, and the longer it went, the more I began to hope. It felt like something inside of me was balancing on its tiptoes, holding its breath.

That hope came crashing down when Jacob said, his voice a shamed mumble, "Don't fall asleep. Sometimes, he can reach you in your dreams."

Then, displaying a speed I hadn't known he was capable of, he yanked the door shut and locked it.

A mindless, panicked sound tore from my throat. I grabbed the handle, but it was too late. I resisted the urge to slam my fist into the side of the car. "Tell me *who he is*, goddamn you! Give me *something*!" I shouted through the glass.

"I'm sorry," Jacob said, the words muffled. He averted his eyes, but not before I saw the guilt in them.

My control fractured. I was about to use my powers on Jacob when he slammed on the gas pedal, and the car lurched in reverse. I heard Finn snarl as I jumped back, barely managing to avoid getting my shoes driven over. I would've toppled over if Finn hadn't reached me a moment later, his body more solid than a tree. He stopped my momentum and I caught my balance by holding onto his fur. Breathing hard, I watched Jacob Goldmann drive away. My mind was already recovering, trying to think of how we could find him again.

Nothing short of a location spell would work. But Jacob had been in hiding for at least two decades. Probably longer, depending on when Belanor's master had first come for him. A location spell required an item of meaning from the person you were trying to find. That or a piece of their body.

I'd seen his house—Jacob had been living like someone who could leave at any time. I already knew I wouldn't find anything that could be used for the spell. Not a hair, not a picture, not a book.

He was determined to stay alive, and he was good at it.

Despite the oppressive heat, the thought made me go cold with realization. Jacob Goldmann, and whatever answers he had, were gone forever. A familiar stinging sensation filled my eyes seconds before everything went hazy, as if I were glaring at the world through a sheet of wax paper. I didn't know if they were tears of frustration or helplessness—both, probably.

As they spilled into the open, leaving wet trails on my cheeks, I gradually became aware of my surroundings again. I turned away from the end of the street where Jacob had disappeared and looked at the werewolf standing beside me. With those extraordinary senses of his, it was safe to assume that he'd heard everything, even from outside. Finn waited

patiently for our next move. His eyes were bright, his body tense. Ready for battle, like the soldier he'd been forced to become.

I stared at his whiskered face, feeling inexplicably sad. We had so much life ahead of us, and there was more to living than the next fight. More than spending hours next to a window, yearning and hoping for a glimpse of the past. My fingers crept across my body, and I traced the edge of a tree branch. I thought of my parents again. They'd fought for me, killed for me, so that I could have that life.

The next fight could wait… for one night, at least.

"C'mon, wolf." With the fingers that I'd just used to touch my tattoo, I reached down and buried them in Finn's coat. Like magic, his warmth began to seep into me. It traveled through my hand, up my arm, and into my chest, thawing everything that Jacob Goldmann had frozen with his cowardice. I let out a sigh and said, "Let's go home."

Finn expressed his agreement with a huffing sound. Hearing it made me smile, but I didn't remove my hand as we left the driveway. Once we got to the street, the two of us faced the horizon, a Nightmare and a werewolf, our bodies covered in scars and sunlight. I didn't let myself look back at Jacob's sad, empty house.

If we ever returned to Florida again, it would be too soon.

We'd only taken a few steps when something else occurred to me. A detail so small that most people would miss it entirely, but Belanor's mysterious master wasn't most people. There was another way he could potentially complete his spell, I realized with slow dread. Another Nightmare that might be powerful enough to endure it. Suddenly my mouth was dry, my heart racing, and I moved faster, thinking only of one name now. Finn heard it through our bond, and he began to run, too.

Matthew.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Dusk shone through the trees.

I deliberately kept my mind empty, because everything I'd just learned from Jacob Goldmann swirled on the other side of the emptiness, threatening to drive me to the brink of insanity again. The last time I felt like this, I had killed dozens of people. *Stay calm, Fortuna. Stay contained.* I chanted this to myself, over and over, hardly seeing the woods around us, barely hearing the snow crunch underfoot.

Finn didn't leave my side once, even when a deer bolted across our path.

Every few yards, I checked to see if there was a signal. Every time there was none, guilt and fear howled around me like a cyclone. Why hadn't I considered the danger to Matthew sooner? Why hadn't he been my first thought the moment I'd learned Belanor had a master using him to kill Nightmares? Clouds of panicked breaths half-blinded me, but I pushed on.

As soon as the house come into view, I scanned the vehicles in the driveway to make sure my loved ones were home and safe. When I saw Damon's car wasn't there, I immediately pulled out my phone. This time there were five bars in the corner of the screen. I began typing with shaking fingers. Though the text was brief, I imagined urgency emanating from every word. *We need to talk. I just got home. Where is Matthew?*

I told myself it was irrational, my desperate need to see him right now. Unless my nephew was an anomaly, as I'd been, his abilities wouldn't manifest until he reached puberty. If they manifested at all. We had time.

He was safe. There was a possibility that Belanor's master didn't even know about Matthew.

Then I heard Jacob's harsh laughter again. *You think our kind has been pushed to the brink of extinction because of hunters?*

I took my phone back out. This time, I tried calling Damon instead of texting him. No answer. Any voicemail I left wouldn't make sense, or it would terrify him. We had time, I thought again, more insistently. I'd just wait to tell Damon about the powerful, ancient creature that had been taking Nightmares for generations. We'd already been on high alert since I escaped the Seelie Court. We'd already known someone wanted one of us for a spell.

But I didn't feel comforted. Starting toward the barn, I thought of how the creature after me seemed to do all his dirty work through servants. Åsa and Belanor were just the ones that I knew of. What if he sent someone else? What if he kidnapped a person I loved as leverage? The creature had shown that he was a killer, whatever else he may be. Nearly everyone he'd set his sights on was dead, in one way or another.

Dead.

The word set off one more chain reaction in my mind.

Decades ago, Mom and Dad ruined this creature's plans. *What have you done?* the witch had said when she sensed the binding spell. Dad thought killing her would end it. But what if it hadn't? What if Belanor's master had gone to our house—or sent one of his many agents—to make an example of them? Or to simply get revenge?

Had this creature been the thing that killed my parents?

When I thought of the weeks leading up to their murders, I remembered normality. Quiet. Joy. Mom and Dad had been taken completely off guard when they were attacked. After those witches had performed the binding spell on me, they'd thought we were safe. It all made sense. The timing, the motive.

There was just one piece that didn't fit. I stopped in front of the barn doors, frowning in thought.

If the creature hunting Nightmares truly was my parents' murderer, why would he leave me and Damon? Why not take us, or kill us?

But… could it also be a coincidence that Belanor had only come once the binding spell was gone? Maybe the killer *had* intended to claim us that night. Maybe he'd deemed me and Damon useless once he'd evaluated our

power. Maybe the monster I'd seen hadn't been a dream or a jumbled memory…

Too many maybes and not enough certainties. Frustration simmered in my veins as I realized, yet again, that I had no way of getting answers. Or, I had, but he'd just driven away somewhere in Florida, never to be found.

At that moment, I comprehended that I'd been standing in the cold all this time, just glaring at nothing while I speculated. I must've made a sound, because Finn's ears perked and he looked back at me. He'd been on his way to the garage, where he often began the transition back to his human shape. He had taken to washing the gore down the big drain, since leaving it in the forest tended to attract other predators, Fallen or otherwise. Thanks to Emma, there would also be a fresh set of clothing waiting for him.

All of that would have to wait, though. Finn came to a complete stop, and his nostrils flared. He looked at me with silent expectation.

We might have to talk about leaving Granby, I thought slowly. The words traveled down the bond between us, which I had begun picturing as a glowing thread in my mind. I couldn't bring myself to speak out loud, not when we didn't know who was listening.

As long as I was here, the others weren't safe.

I couldn't deny it anymore, despite how fiercely I'd been trying. I could go back to wearing the goblin ring, but it wouldn't be hard for any spies to connect the dots. Once they figured out who the bland-faced stranger was, they would do everything possible to complete the spell. It wouldn't take much, either. Even if Damon was too weak for their purposes, as Belanor had claimed, my brother could still be used against me… along with everyone else who had become our family.

And if Matthew did turn out to be a Nightmare, what then? Leaving them wouldn't be enough. Damon and the others needed to move, too. No one was safe.

I tried to think of another way. I looked up at the barn, thinking of how important it had become to me. Not just the loft, but the house and the woods around them, too. This was where I'd found a family. This was where I'd shattered, then put myself back together. It was… home.

Maybe I'm being too paranoid, I thought desperately. During my time as the Unseelie Queen, I had done everything in my power to keep this place secret. There were probably some Guardians who knew, but they

weren’t the gossiping sort. It wasn’t even in the Granby records, since the barn was in Collith’s name and we’d been living in Cyrus’s house these past few weeks.

The problem was that Belanor had known. He’d probably passed my location on to his master the moment he confirmed I was here. I felt myself deflate as the hope left my body.

Even in the unlikely event that Belanor hadn’t told anyone, we couldn’t stay here. Any of us. My enemy, whoever he was, had access to witches. One of them would be doing a location spell soon, if they hadn’t already.

There would be no time for living, I admitted to myself. We were still in survival mode.

I took a shuddering breath, preparing myself for everything that lay ahead. Telling our family why we needed to go into hiding. Packing whatever would fit in our cars. Finding a new place to live. Erasing our tracks.

I’m scared, Finn.

The thought slipped out of my head, an unintentional truth. The werewolf’s eyes softened—he knew. Of course he knew. Not only could he sense it with his nose and his ears, but he could feel it, too.

“Do you think it would be okay if we left tomorrow?” I asked quietly. “Leave tomorrow, and give ourselves one more night here. Just one more.”

Finn’s gaze shifted, roaming toward the horizon to the south, and in that moment the werewolf told an unintentional truth of his own. Flitting down the bond like a piece of paper on a gust of wind, I saw a mental image. It was Amy’s face. I moved further down the thread connecting us, imagining myself holding onto it with both hands. More of Finn’s thoughts came toward me.

After a moment, I discovered that he hadn’t just been watching Amy through the window at Bea’s—he’d been following her, too. I could feel his intentions, and they were as pure as they would’ve been with his own daughter. But the werewolf’s protectiveness had turned into obsession. On the rare occasions Finn wasn’t here, or at my side, he sought Amy. He stayed hidden, wearing his other form at all times as he slept beneath her bedroom window or outside her classroom at school.

Oh, Finn, I thought, my heart breaking for him all over again. I didn’t tell him that Amy wasn’t Katie—he already knew that. She had just

become a temporary reprieve for the pain. A way for him to pretend he'd managed to save his little girl.

Leaving would be good in more ways than one.

Our eyes met in silent agreement. We turned away from each other, Finn to transition in the garage, me to go upstairs and greet whoever was home. Maybe Nym would be up for a game of checkers while I waited for Damon.

But when I reached the loft, it appeared that Emma was the only one here. Here in the open, at least. I could hear music coming from Nym's room. He'd been going through a phase where he was obsessed with '90s hits. The door was shut, which had become a signal, of sorts. On the days Nym was partially coherent, he left it cracked open.

"Were you working at Bea's today?" Emma asked from her place in front of the stove. She was making several grilled cheese sandwiches, a sure sign that she'd been smoking today. The smell of melted cheddar filled the air.

I slid onto one of the barstools and shook my head. "No. I went to see someone."

Emma's arm moved, and when she turned, she was holding a plate in her hand. She set it down in front of me and raised her eyebrows. "Oh? Did you learn anything?"

I'd already picked up the sandwich and taken a huge bite. At Emma's question, it felt like the bread got stuck halfway down my throat. I swallowed, buying myself a few seconds to mentally rehearse. I'd have to talk to Emma about leaving sooner or later, and if I did it now, she could help me when I told the others.

Before I could say a word, though, someone was pounding on the door. Someone was screaming. I heard my name, but the rest of it was intelligible, the air swollen with fear. Dropping the grilled cheese with a clatter, I rushed across the room. Emma was close behind me. I wrenched the door open and glared at the necromancer trembling in our stairwell.

"Savannah, what in the *hell* are you—"

She shoved past me, diving into the loft before I could stop her. A torrent of words left her mouth as she bolted for the kitchen. "I didn't know where else to go. She came to the Unseelie Court looking for me, and the fae weren't willing to die for my sake, so I ran. Stop her. Stop her, Fortuna!"

“Stop *who*?” I demanded, following her.

“The Witch Killer!” Savannah wailed, sliding down until she was squatting, her spine pressed against the corner cupboard. That was when I realized she’d reverted back to the weeping, half-mad creature who had once screamed at me in the throne room. If Savannah were in her right mind, she wouldn’t have come here and put Matthew’s life at risk.

As if she’d heard her son’s name in my thoughts, Savannah shot to her feet.

“What kind of creature is it, at least?” I asked, following her into the room my brother and nephew shared. “Give me an idea of what to expect. I’ll help you, okay? But you need to help me, too.”

She whirled, her eyes so wild that I drew back. “I’ve never seen it,” she breathed. “I can hear it, though. I hear it all the time! Like thunder!”

Savannah’s hands bunched into fists, and without warning, the necromancer started hitting herself in the head. Swearing, I caught hold of her arms. A shadow filled the doorway behind us, and I looked over my shoulder at Emma.

“Will you stay with her?” I asked tersely. There was no time to worry about the fact that I was about to leave Emma alone with the person who killed her husband.

“Of course. Go,” she said, grabbing Savannah’s wrists.

I turned and ran. As I flew down the stairs, I fought the urge to summon Laurie, thinking of how he’d called me a distraction. I focused on the bonds instead. *Gil. Finn.* I imagined their threads and tugged at them.

The distance between me and Gil made it clear he was in town. Finn was still in the garage struggling with his transition—he’d been a wolf for too long this time. Though I felt their responses instantly, I knew they wouldn’t be able to help me. I tried Lyari next. She didn’t appear, either. I opened the barn door and stepped outside, scanning the driveway and the distant tree lines. Cringing at what I was about to do, the syllables of Collith’s name formed in my mind.

Gwyn stepped out of the darkness.

She wore black leggings, thick boots, and a fur vest over a white shirt. Her blond hair hung to her waist in a braid adorned with wooden spikes. I blinked with genuine surprise, and the sight of her made my thoughts dissipate like mist. “*You’ve* been killing witches? Why?” I blurted.

The huntress twirled her sword, making it seem light as a feather, but I knew how heavy swords were now. I knew the strength that simple-looking maneuver required. Her blade caught the moonlight in a flash of silver as she answered, “Revenge, of course. You weren’t even a twinkle in your mother’s eye when I started hunting them. Most of the witches who cursed and entombed Creiddylad are long dead, but they have many, many descendants. I like to imagine screams from the other dimensions as I slaughter their bloodlines. With Creiddylad free, there’s no more need for discretion. It’s made the Hunt so much more enjoyable. I suppose I have you to thank for that, my dark queen.”

“Don’t call me that,” I said through my teeth.

There was more movement in the trees—the Wild Hunt, I discovered after I’d spared a glance in that direction. I hadn’t heard them arrive, but I’d been distracted by Savannah. *Thunder,* she said upstairs. That was how she’d described the sound of her pursuer. It made sense now.

Horses and human-shaped figures emerged from pockets of shadow. Like the last time I’d seen these fearsome riders, the dark-haired male sat in the center. *Second-in-command*, I thought. His eyes were fixed on me, gleaming with menace.

Turning back to me, Gwyn cocked her head. “Which part offends you? ‘Dark’ or ‘queen?’”

“Both. I am neither.”

“Still lying to ourselves, I see,” the faerie remarked, starting toward the barn. “Now, I’d love to discuss this further with you, but I have a hunt to finish. Perhaps afterward we could—”

I moved to put myself in her path. It was a pointless gesture; Gwyn might possess the ability to sift, and even if she didn’t, she was capable of cutting me down in a heartbeat. I could only hope a little intrigue would buy me time to think.

“I’m afraid your hunt ends here, Gwyn. Turn around and leave, right now,” I ordered with more bravado than I felt.

“Or what?” she questioned, sounding genuinely curious, just as I’d planned.

I met the huntress’s gaze without flinching. An idea had formed in my mind. A dark, terrible idea. “Or I’ll make you.”

There was a tense pause, and then Gwyn pointed her sword at me.

“That,” she said, ignoring how I’d stiffened. “*That* is why I couldn’t bring myself to end you when the time came. ’Twould be a shame to snuff out such a lovely flame. But you’re standing between me and what I want, Fortuna Sworn, which presents a problem. So now I must ask myself which is more important… revenge or desire?”

Gwyn’s gaze went from my face to the window above my head, as if she were really torn between the two. Then she stepped toward me again, flipping her sword, and I knew she’d made her choice.

But learning that Gwyn had been killing for her own agenda, even before I’d freed her, felt like the missing piece to yet another puzzle.

“You’re the one who’s been killing heads of the Unseelie bloodlines, too,” I said flatly, remembering Micah’s accusation in the throne room. *Someone is murdering council members, Your Majesty, and Fortuna Sworn has made multiple threats against this Court*.

This time, the faerie across from me said nothing, which seemed like answer enough. I quirked a brow in an attempt to keep her attention on my face and continued, “You made one vital mistake, Gwyn of the Wild Hunt.”

Her mouth curled with amusement. “And what mistake is that?”

Ignoring the quiver of fear in my belly, I closed the space between us. Gwyn wasn’t alarmed or threatened; her posture remained relaxed. Her gaze was bright with curiosity. Perks of being a creature that couldn’t be killed, I supposed. I smiled up at her, making it soft and inviting, and I willed my power to float around me like a perfume. To entice, and allure, and distract. For once, I welcomed the seductive side of what I was… and it worked. Gwyn couldn’t take her eyes off my mouth.

She was still watching it when I crooned, answering her question at last, “You brought a sword to a gunfight.”

Gwyn was so preoccupied with the beauty she saw that she reacted a beat too late as I took out my Glock, raised it, and shot her in the chest.

The force of it sent the faerie to her knees. In an instant, her riders surged from the woods and flew toward us with supernatural speed, weapons raised. I saw the flash of fangs and a glimpse of yellow eyes. I raised the Glock again, and I brought my other hand up, palm-out, a physical gesture that helped to ready my power. But Gwyn surprised me by making an abrupt gesture, her meaning clear. *Stop*. The oncoming figures

immediately halted. The dark-haired one glared at me with a promise written in the lines around his mouth.

Good doggy, I thought. His eyes went black, as if he'd heard the taunt.

"You've surprised me," Gwyn commented, drawing my attention back to her. She knelt in the snow, holding a gauntlet-covered hand against her wound. Blue blood already stained the metal. Gwyn winced and added, "Was that a holy bullet? Hurts like one."

"As holy as it gets," I said, grateful when my voice didn't shake. "I aimed for your heart, but I'm not entirely convinced you have one. Leave with your hunters, right now, or you won't like what comes next."

She laughed, and blood splattered her lips. "I am immortal, foolish creature. I will heal from this."

"Good thing I wasn't trying to kill you, then," I countered.

"I said stop, Spindle!" Gwyn snarled—the dark-haired faerie had started moving forward again. He stopped, glowering, and Gwyn refocused on me. Her brows lowered. "Why go to such lengths for this witch? I've heard rumors. Rumors that you look at her with hatred in your eyes."

I did my signature shrug, lifting one shoulder in a devil-may-care way. A freezing wind blew strands of my long hair across my chin. Snowflakes swirled like tiny, frozen ballerinas. "A lot of reasons," I said lightly. "Because she's the mother of my nephew. Because my brother loved her once. Because some people deserve a second chance. But mostly because I refuse to stand by and watch you chop off anyone else's head. I have enough bad dreams, and you'll be getting my next therapy bill, by the way."

"I'm not going anywhere." Gwyn accentuated the ferocity of this statement with a blood-filled smile. The bullet must've struck something vital—goody for me.

"Then you leave me no choice." I stepped forward, dropped to my knees, and grasped the front of her fur-lined vest. Even now, Gwyn didn't fight back or raise a hand to defend herself. I pulled her to me, and our mouths met in a clash of blood and desire that had been simmering for weeks, starting from the night we first met.

It was a kiss I knew I'd never forget. The sort of kiss that woke a person in the middle of the night, making them touch their lips in a remembrance that was painful and beautiful at the same time. Accepting that it would never happen again, but glad that it had. Kissing her was like

throwing myself off a cliff without knowing what awaited at the bottom. It was power and euphoria and desire, all contained in her taste, her mouth, her hands as she pulled me against her in the bitter cold, our breath mingling and becoming one wild cloud. I cupped Gwyn's cold cheeks and deepened the kiss, something inside me clenching at the sound she made deep in her throat.

I didn't want to end it. But I had what I needed and time wasn't on my side.

When I'd touched Gwyn's face, I'd made sure to touch the blood trailing down her chin. I clenched my hand into a fist, protecting the blood I'd stolen as I pulled away and got to my feet. Gwyn stayed where she was, her lips swollen, her blond braid loosened and mussed. I admired the huntress for a moment, knowing everything would change once I spoke again.

Just as I started to, there was movement in the window above. I glanced up and saw a thin figure standing there—Nym must've been drawn by the sound of a gunshot. His eyes met mine, and he gave me a subtle nod before he backed away from the glass, leaving behind a smear of fingerprints.

I didn't know what that nod meant, but seeing Nym was exactly what I'd needed. A reminder of who, and what, I was fighting for. Even if I blackened my soul in the process. *They're worth it*. I looked down at Gwyn again, my eyes narrowed, heart hardened with resolve. "Repeat the vows I'm about to say, and I might think about making this easier for you," I said.

Gwyn laughed and rasped, "I will make no vows of fealty to you, silly creature."

"I'm not an expert at this, and I suspect a willing soldier is more effective than an unwilling one, but I don't need your permission. Just your blood… and mine." In a savage movement, I ripped my arm open with my teeth. I backed away and shoved my fingers, still covered with Gwyn's blood, into the ragged gash. Enochian poured out of my mouth in a strong, certain chant. I'd only said the words twice before, but they came to me now like old friends. Like the magic *wanted* to be used. *"Allar gono epoh. Allar gono epoh. Allar gono epoh!"*

By the time the dark-haired faerie—Spindle—started forward again, it was too late. Already I could feel a fresh bond forming, a new thread

attaching.

It seemed different from the others, probably because I didn't force Gwyn to say any of the things Gil and Finn had said while their spells were forging. Or maybe the kiss was to blame, and the lingering connection it had forged between us. Or maybe it worked due to the fact that I'd consumed a little of her blood, and could taste it even now.

Or maybe the sounds pouring out of my mouth were Words, the language of a god, and that overpowered everything else.

Whatever the reason, this bond wasn't as pure or gentle as the ones I shared with Gil and Finn. This connection was made of shadow, and smoke, and black fire. It hurt to touch and everything about it felt wrong. Seconds after its creation, I wanted it gone. I fortified my mental wall as a precaution—something told me that I'd need to keep my guard up constantly now.

Gwyn knew what I'd done, of course. At some point during my chanting, she'd flown to her feet, her teeth bared in an expression of savagery. Her sword was drawn back, as if she'd been forced to stop mid-swing. Her hunters, too, had frozen in place. Even Spindle. We could all feel each other, I realized with grim fascination. They had a bond to Gwyn, who now had a bond to me. Through her, I could control the Wild Hunt, one of the oldest and most evil magics in existence.

"How?" Gwyn snarled. "You're not a witch. You're not from the Tongue's bloodline."

"No, I'm not. Despite your long life, Gwyn of bloodline Nudd, there are many things you still don't know. I am something you've never encountered before, and it was a mistake to cross me. One that I can't imagine you'll make again." For the next part, I raised my voice so Gwyn's riders would hear, as well. "Since you turned down my generous offer to make this easier, we'll do it the hard way. You will never kill another witch, unless I command you to. You will never hunt another person, unless I give you leave to do so. You will not plot revenge against me. Tonight you will leave in peace, and return only when I summon you."

Gwyn lowered her sword. She looked first at the dripping tear in my arm, then at the steady gun I'd pointed in Spindle's direction, and finally back at my face. I couldn't define the light that shone in the faerie's eyes. Her smile, too, was small and ambiguous. "I told you," she said quietly. "I

told you that one day you would be just like me. That day came even sooner than I expected."

Her words rolled off me like a bead racing across a wooden floor. I smiled back, but there was nothing confusing about the curve of my lips—it was pitying. "I will never be like you, because there's one vital difference between us. Something I have that you don't."

Gwyn tipped her head to the side, lazily appraising me from my hairline to my chin. From the bond, I knew she wanted another kiss. Confirming this, her voice was throaty as she replied, "And what's that?"

But I was remembering another mistake she'd made. Remembering another prediction she'd thrown in my face, which had battered at my sanity ever since. *Someday you will know what it is to choose between love and power. Someday you will be just like me.*

"A family," I answered flatly. Adding insult to injury, I put my back to her and said over my shoulder, "Only when I summon you, Gwyn. Remember that."

With that, I left her there. Gwyn reached for the magic immediately, testing its strength, searching for weaknesses. The new bond thrashed and fought like a wild horse. I grabbed hold of it just to show her that I could. Within those strands I was surprised to discover… admiration. Gwyn watched me walk toward the barn, and even with a bullet in her chest, she was able to admire my ass as I went.

That wasn't all she admired, though. I wasn't sure anyone had gotten the best of Gwyn in a century or two, and she couldn't help but respect me for it. I wasn't a complete fool, of course—I knew there were more feelings and thoughts at the end of Gwyn's thread. She was probably forming a plan to kill me while she undressed me with her eyes. I knew she was, because I was doing the same thing.

"Did we miss the party?" someone called, startling both of us.

The voice floated from the dark, and its owner emerged a second later. Gil strode toward me casually, his hair artfully gelled, hands shoved in the pockets of his grease-stained jeans. Finn was slightly behind him, fresh from the transformation. He'd been too frantic to hose off, because pieces of torn flesh clung to his neck and forearms. The clean clothes Emma had left for him already needed to be washed again.

"Sorry, boys, party is over," I told them. "Our guests were just leaving."

Though I was responding to Gil, I directed the words at Gwyn. She gave no indication that she'd even heard me. The werewolf moved to stand on my right, and the vampire appeared on my left. They must've felt the new bond I'd made, but I didn't sense anger from either of my friends. For once, the two of them were in perfect agreement, identical waves of protectiveness emanating from both of their minds. I realized these natural enemies had finally found a common ground—me.

Gwyn studied each male closely. When she was finished, she met my gaze again, and her expression was fathomless. "It's been mere weeks since we spoke last, Nightmare," she said slowly, "and in that time you've bound this many to you? I underestimated that delicious darkness writhing in your heart. It may be the death of us all… and what a death it will be."

For these final words, her voice was an eerie, anticipatory whisper. I stared back at her, thinking that it almost seemed as though Gwyn of the Wild Hunt *wanted* to die. Suddenly I was tempted to use the connection between us to learn more about this ancient warrior. She wouldn't be able to keep me out now.

Her taunt was the only reason why I hesitated. No, why I resisted.

Instead, I walked into the barn. It took exactly seven steps to reach it, and for those seven seconds, it felt like the only sounds in the world were my boots on the frozen gravel and the hollow wind. Neither Gwyn or her hunters tried to stop me—they couldn't. Hiding an unexpected rush of satisfaction, I waited for Gil and Finn to pass before I pulled the door shut. It clanked into place and enshrouded us in silence. No one said anything. I stood there for a moment, processing what had just happened. What I'd just done. Then I squared my shoulders, took a breath, and headed for the stairs.

I had left Emma alone with a hysterical necromancer who was responsible for murdering her husband.

I pulled out my cell phone to send Damon a warning. I also sent a text to Lyari, asking if she was all right. My companions followed me up into the loft, and the thunder of the Wild Hunt's departure filled the air, then faded into nothing.

As soon as we walked over the threshold, the lights hit Finn, and the sight of him hurt. He was even filthier than I thought. Blood smeared every part of his solemn face, and bits of bone were buried in his hair. He

must've sped the transformation process when he heard the Wild Hunt arrive.

Concern pricked my heart. Werewolves lived extraordinarily long lives, if they weren't killed… and if they didn't kill themselves. I'd heard of their bodies giving out, wearing down, and Finn's lined face made me worry he was on his way to being one of those wolves.

But those wolves didn't have a meddlesome Nightmare in their lives.

"Why don't you use the shower in my room?" I suggested gently.

When Finn didn't acknowledge me, I put my hand on his shoulder. It was hot, as if the guilt he felt was radiating through his very skin. I didn't need magic to know why he was so full of self-loathing—he thought he'd failed me. Just as he thought he'd failed me at the hospital. Just as he thought he'd failed Katie and his mate before that. I put my palms on both sides of his neck, forcing him to focus. "It wasn't your fault, Finn. *Any* of it. Do you understand me?"

By now, I knew the werewolf so well that I didn't expect an answer in words. Finn's language was a silent one, but it was no less powerful. My question floated between us for a moment, then he wrapped his fingers around my wrists and bowed his head, breathing deeply. The bond between us lit up, glowing with our shared love, grief, and pain. I used our connection to communicate the truth Finn still couldn't bring himself to believe, chanting it like a spell. *It wasn't your fault*. *It wasn't your fault*.

"I am… uncomfortable," Gil decided, his voice cutting between us.

The bond dimmed and Finn released his hold on me. I rolled my eyes, but it had done exactly what Gil intended—the tension in the room eased. It felt like I could breathe for the first time since Savannah had knocked on the door. I was still buzzing with magic and adrenaline, though. I turned to Gil and asked, "How much have you picked up from the bond? What do you know about Savannah Simonson?"

Finn's footsteps made the floor creak as he went to shower. Considering my questions, Gil's head tilted. "I know that she's a necromancer, and a powerful one," he said. "I know that she's the kid's mother. I know that whenever she's nearby or her name comes up, people's scents change and their hearts beat faster. And I know that she's in the bathroom with Emma, who basically told me everything when we got high together last Tuesday."

Savannah and Emma were in the bathroom? Why was it so quiet, then? Anxious for the old woman's safety, I strode down the hall quickly. Faint sounds floated through the door, and I recognized Emma's voice. They were talking about Fred. My shoulders slumped, and as I turned, my gaze flicked to the door on the other side. I considered checking on Nym—in my mind's eye, I saw that strange nod he'd given me during the confrontation with Gwyn—but my head was starting to hurt. Conversations with Nym tended to be confusing and sad, which would only add to the dull throb.

Telling myself I'd talk to him in the morning, I returned to the main room instead. I sank onto the couch and released a long, weary sigh. Gil dropped on the cushion next to me, hitting the leather so hard that it sounded like a slap. For a minute, we listened to the sound of running water. The refrigerator hummed and rattled as it made another batch of ice.

"It figures that, instead of finding a way to break the bond, I just make another one. Story of my life," I muttered, already brooding over everything I could've done differently during my latest confrontation with Gwyn.

"Break the bond?" Gil echoed, his face turning toward me.

I looked back at him. My eyebrows drew together, and remorse stabbed my heart for the thousandth time. "Yeah. That was always my plan, but we keep getting attacked, so I've been a little distracted. When I did the spell, I didn't want to enslave you to me, Gil. I was trying to defend myself. I *will* fix it, okay?"

"You think the bond took away my choices?" Abandoning the couch, Gil squatted in front of me, his hands folded between his knees. There was no trace of sarcasm in his voice as he said, "The bond doesn't take anything away from me. It *gives* to me."

I shook my head. "What are you talking about, Gil? It gives to you? You haven't borrowed any of my power, I would've felt it."

"Just shut up and let me try to put it into words." He sat preternaturally still, his angular features sharpening from the intensity of his thoughts. "Before I met you in that wretched cell, I was alone in the world. Oh, I had Nicky, of course, but I had no family of my own. I'd come home to my empty apartment every night and get high just to avoid the loneliness. Now all of that has changed. Even if I go back to that empty apartment, I

know I'll never feel lonely again. It's the same for the werewolf, by the way—I've heard his thoughts. God, it's annoying. *Fortuna* this and *Fortuna* that. The guy needs to get a hobby. Hey, is Tinder still a thing?"

"Gil."

"You're right, I'm getting off track. My point is, the spell you cast was just a connection, Sworn. But that connection is what allows us to know each other in a way few people get to experience. How could we not love, after that? How could we not come to cherish those glimpses, or knowing that every time we reach out, there will always be someone on the other end?

"And before you get worried, no, it's not *that* sort of love," Gil added, getting back to his feet in a blur. "Even now, I wouldn't fuck you to save my own life."

He flopped back onto the couch. I watched him, my lips twisted in thought. There was a lot to unpack about everything he'd just said. I had never seen Gil so earnest, and he'd essentially put words to the same things I'd been feeling. But in spite of all that… there was still a possibility none of it was real. Magic wasn't always a show and a bang; sometimes it was a whisper in a dream, influencing us where we were most vulnerable.

My head throbbed anew, and suddenly I didn't want to talk about this anymore. At least not tonight.

I deliberately focused on the last part of Gil's short speech. "Did you just say that you'd rather *die* than have sex with me?" I asked with raised brows.

The vampire pretended to contemplate this. "I suppose when you put it that way… yeah," he said.

"You're an asshole."

"That may be, but I'm *your* asshole, darling." Gil hooked an arm around my neck and yanked me close, pressing an obnoxious kiss against my temple. "And if you ever tell anyone I said all this horribly sappy shit, I'll rip your guts out and feed them to the fishies in the Thames, bond or no bond."

I shoved him away, scowling. Gil snickered and jumped up again, ambling toward the kitchen as if he were taking a stroll through London. He opened the fridge and took out a blood bag, which he'd stored here while we were waiting for Belanor and the final showdown. Adam

obtained the bags through means I'd never wanted to know specifics about.

"If you don't use a glass, Emma will yell at you," I called.

Even Gil didn't have the stamina to go up against the old woman. The silverware drawer slid open, then I listened to him open the door to the microwave. There were a few beeps. Gil cursed, and this was followed by more beeping. A familiar hum ventured into the stillness. In the meantime, I checked my phone and realized that I'd missed two texts coming in.

The first was from Damon. More tension left my body as I read it. *Thanks for the head's up. We'll hang out at Danny's. Let me know when she leaves. You can explain your text about Matthew when we get back.*

The other was from Lyari. Hers was more worrisome. *I'm fine. Be back tomorrow,* the brief message read.

I reread it, frowning. What could Lyari possibly be doing that would make her ignore my panicked summons earlier? *Maybe I'm asking the wrong question*, I thought, looking down at the text again. What could Lyari possibly be doing that would make her *miss* my panicked summons?

Gil had just flopped back onto the couch—he'd put a metal straw in his cup, and it rattled against the rim—when the bathroom door opened.

I shoved my phone in my pocket and stood reluctantly. Savannah stopped in front of me, her eyes downcast. I wondered if she'd left the couch between us by design. The gown she'd been wearing when she first arrived was gone, replaced by a pair of Emma's whitewashed jeans and a sweater that read, MERRY CANNABIS on the front.

"My head is quiet now. Thank you," Savannah whispered, her entire body quaking. Emma appeared behind her. I spared a glance at the old woman, asking her with my expression, *Are you okay?*

Emma gave me a soft smile and nodded. I refocused on Savannah.

"Don't make me regret saving you," I said, but I didn't have the energy to make the words threatening. Walking toward the door, I swallowed a weary sigh and added, "We'd better get going. I hate walking to the Unseelie Court in the dark."

Savannah shook her head. "You don't need to walk me back. Really. I'll be okay, especially now that the Witch Killer is gone."

"I have some business there anyway. After you." I reached for my coat. As I pulled it on, I turned toward Emma. I darted a glance at Savannah and lowered my voice to say, "We need to have another family meeting.

Tonight. Will you text Damon and let him know it's safe to come home? Oh, and tell him not to let Matthew out of his sight."

"I'm on it." Emma turned away, producing her phone like a magic trick.

Savannah disappeared into the stairwell. I started to follow her, thought better of it, and fixed my gaze on Gil. "Will you stick around for a bit? Keep an eye on things while I'm gone? I know Finn is here, but it never hurts to have two people keeping watch, instead of one."

The straw made a crackling sound as he sucked on it. "You know," the vampire drawled, "you keep saying you're not a queen. Seems to me like you've been protecting this small Court since we got here."

I scoffed. "I'm hardly protecting—"

The look he gave me made the rest of my sentence vanish. A look that said I was being dense. *Oh*, I thought. Gil wasn't talking about the Unseelie Court. He was accusing me of protecting this one. *My* Court.

I glowered and gave him the finger. Gil raised his glass in return, his thin lips curved into a smirk. "Thanks for the straw," the vampire said.

Mirroring his smirk, I opened the door and moved into the stairwell. I poked my head through the crack to say, "It's Lyari's, actually. Did I forget to mention? She puts it in her green smoothies, and that faerie has the nose of a hound. No amount of dish soap will get the smell of blood off. So… it was nice knowing you."

I yanked the door shut just in time, and the pillow he'd thrown slammed against the wood with alarming force.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The next morning, I woke to birdsong and sunlight.

I turned my face to the right, seeking the warmth spilling across the pillow. Hello purred against my rib cage, better than a space heater or a heated blanket. Reluctant to leave, I spent a few minutes gazing out the window. Though we were nearing the end of December, icicles just beyond the glass were melting, the cold they needed being driven out by the rising sun. I watched tiny droplets catch the light as they fell.

For the first time in months, my life felt… normal. Safe.

But it wasn't safe. As I laid there, I thought about last night's family meeting. It certainly hadn't gone how I expected.

I'd gotten back from the Unseelie Court and found everyone gathered in the living room. Finn, Damon, Danny, Lyari, Emma, and Gil. It was also the order they sat in, which was clearly by design—even though they were on opposite ends of the couch, tension thrummed between the werewolf and the vampire. The only ones absent were Nym and Matthew. The former still hadn't come out of his room, and the latter could be heard from a baby monitor on the coffee table.

This time, as I communicated with my family, I kept more details to myself. I told them about the memories I had unburied, but said nothing about the monsters I'd battled nightly in my head to get to them. I also skimmed over the parts involving the changes in my abilities as a child, or what had happened to Mom and Dad as a result. Without mentioning Jacob Goldmann or the identical brands on our shoulders, I shared my suspicions about the connection between the creature who'd tried to take me as a child and the one who'd secured me through Belanor now, seventeen years

later. I forced myself to meet Damon's gaze as I spoke of Matthew and the potential danger he was in.

Once I was finished, everyone was quiet. Worried my family had sensed all the holes in my story, I tried to prepare for questions they might ask.

To my surprise, Damon had been the one to speak first. *If we run, we won't stop running,* he said.

If you run, you live, I had countered, the words tinged with desperation.

My brother gave me a soft smile, showing a glimpse of the boy he'd once been, full of ideals and certainty. *Would we, though?*

The others nodded or voiced their agreement, which took me by surprise, as well. Sadly, it had never occurred to me they would feel the same way as I did about the home we'd built together. That alone seemed worth fighting for. Realizing that I couldn't very well force everyone to do what I wanted, and that we truly were staying here, I squashed my fear beneath the weight of resolve.

Fine, I'd told them past the lump of guilt in my throat. It was because of me that we were in danger and even having this discussion. I swallowed and went on, sounding far calmer than I felt. *But we're taking extra precautions. Don't try to argue with me on this, please. First, I want you all to share your locations with each other. Second, check-ins. Everyone in the group chat needs to send the all-clear. I'm talking hourly, people. Next, self-defense. Anyone who lives here needs to know how to protect themselves. Lyari, this is your time to shine…*

Sounds drifted from the kitchen. The memory faded, and I glanced at the alarm clock. It was only eight a.m. Deciding that I'd earned a little laziness, I retrieved *Moby Dick* from the nightstand. As I began to read, I saw a flash of the book in someone else's hands. Someone with silver hair and a smirk that made you think about bedrooms and things that happened in the dark. I shook my head as if I could physically banish the memory. With effort, I focused on the tiny print in front of me, reading aloud in a drowsy murmur, "'Human madness is oftentimes a cunning and most feline thing. When you think it fled, it may have but become transfigured into some still subtler form…'"

My attention span didn't allow me to stay that way long. An hour later, I put the book down and went into the bathroom. Hello curled in the spot I'd been lying and promptly fell back asleep. Spoiled little beast.

An empty loft greeted me when I finally emerged from my room. I stopped in the middle of the space and turned in a circle, realizing that I was alone. The others had really gone on with their lives as usual, despite the warning I'd given them. Damon would be at work, Matthew at daycare, and Finn was either at Bea's or on a hunt. Last night, Emma had mentioned going to Denver for some shopping, so that explained her absence. Cyrus's truck was gone, as well. Nym and Lyari's bedrooms were unoccupied, and I knew the former was probably with Emma. Lyari, well, who knew what she did in her spare time? Probably off frightening small children or hacking at a tree with her sword.

Maybe she'd sent a text while I was sleeping. Realizing that I'd forgotten my phone on the coffee table last night, I padded over to it. The screen brightened as soon as I picked it up. There were two voicemails waiting, the first from Emma and the second from an unknown number. Pressing PLAY on the most recent one, I lodged my phone between my ear and shoulder and walked to the refrigerator.

A familiar voice rumbled through the speaker, and my stomach dropped at the sound of it. I'd heard this voice a thousand times, but usually it was ordering black coffee and a breakfast sandwich. "I have a message for Fortuna Sworn. Miss Sworn, this is Sheriff O'Connell," he said as if we hadn't seen each other nearly every morning for the past seven years. "I need to touch base with you at your earliest convenience. If you could come down to the station, that would be great. You can reach me at this number."

Damn it. I lowered the phone while Sheriff O'Connell was still reciting his contact information. I hadn't figured out how I was going to explain my sudden disappearance from the hospital. I'd gone with a kidnapping story when those goblins had snatched me off the mountain, and claiming to be kidnapped twice probably wouldn't go over well. Frowning, I poured milk and cereal into a bowl, fetched a spoon, and slid onto a barstool. As I began to eat, I stared at the wall and mentally flipped through potential lies I could give the sheriff. I also listened to Emma's voicemail in the meantime.

She'd just finished when Hello twined around my ankles, yowling as if she hadn't been fed in days. Forgetting Sheriff O'Connell, I raised my eyebrows at her. "I know for a *fact* you had breakfast. Emma told me so, and I trust her more than you."

Hello darted away, complaining as she went. Chewing loudly, I looked around and found myself unsettled by the stillness. I'd been alone often since returning from the Seelie Court, but something felt different about today. I couldn't shake a sense of…. expectancy. Like I was waiting for someone. Maybe I had made plans the last time I was drunk. Or, more likely, I'd gotten so used to chaos that part of me was always preparing for it.

It was time for the question. The one I asked myself during these rare stretches of quiet and peace. Time that I'd learned to seize whenever possible. *What do I want to do next?*

I could head to Adam's and do some more training with the sword, or finally face Bea, or go on a run. As I kept considering the options, my gaze fell on a sad-looking fern resting on the window sill over the sink. Damon had been so distracted by Matthew and Danny lately that, for the first time in his life, he'd neglected his precious plants.

Seeing how the leaves had begun to turn brown, a new idea formed in my head. Deciding to follow the impulse, I hurried into my room to get dressed. Once I was back in the main space, I paused long enough to don a coat, hat, and boots. The keys were hanging on the hook, and I snatched them up with a jangling sound. Then I went down the stairs, got in my van, and drove into town.

After a trip to the gardening store, I returned to a still-empty homestead. Humming a song that had been playing on the radio, I carried two paper bags inside, heavy with the plants and supplies I'd bought. My face tingled from the cold.

With music blaring from my phone, I bustled around the kitchen. I had just covered the counter with everything I'd need when Hello jumped onto one of the stools. She leaned toward me so eagerly that she almost fell, and I scratched her chin absently, surveying the rows of pots I'd set out. The kitten began to purr, her eyes squeezing shut with pleasure. I tapped her nose and pulled away to pour soil into one of the pots. Once it was full, I dug my first tiny hole, where the seeds would hopefully become more than an idea in my head.

I lost track of time after that. I worked for so long that my gloves got caked in soil, the fingertips blackened, as if I'd burned them in a pile of soot. When I ran out of pots, and all the other plants in the loft had been

tended to, I turned my attention to the recycle bin full of empty liquor bottles. Hadn't Damon mentioned making a bottle planter recently?

A smile spread across my face—I knew for a fact that I'd find a glass cutter in Emma's crafting corner. I launched into movement. Seconds later, I found the cutter without any difficulty. *Perfect*. I didn't hesitate to lose myself all over again, singing along to The Killers.

Outside, the sky began to darken, light blue sinking into a deep periwinkle. But the loft was bright and warm, filled with sound, and I felt something extremely close to contentment. The feeling only heightened when I changed into a ratty shirt and some boxer shorts. On stockinged feet, I glided across the floor and returned to the bottles. It had been a long time since I'd had such a beautifully mundane day, and the simplicity of my task made something inside of me begin to stitch shut. A wound, closing, healing into a scar. I felt a faint, involuntary smile touch my lips as I worked, and I even started to sway in time to the music.

An hour or so into my new project, I finally raised my head at the sound of knocking.

Oh, shit. What if it was Sheriff O'Connell? I froze with my hands holding a bottle and the glass cutter. The knock came again, confirming that I hadn't been hearing things.

My first instinct was to pretend I wasn't home. But I'd been singing, and music was still playing—the man undoubtedly knew I was here. On the off chance he hadn't heard me, however, I would much rather avoid seeing the ol' sheriff until I knew how to answer his questions. Moving slowly, carefully, I set the bottle and glass cutter down on the counter. I held my breath as I reached for my phone, fingers shaking with urgency. The sheriff was going to call me. Any second now, my phone would ring and he'd definitely know I was hiding in here. I managed to set it to silent on time and exhaled faintly, my shoulders slumping.

Then a familiar voice said through the wood, "I know you're there, Fortuna."

Relief blazed through me. Letting out a pent-up breath, I rushed to open the door, eager to confirm that it wasn't the sheriff on the other side. Just as I'd hoped, Collith stood in the shadowed stairwell.

"Never thought I'd be happy to see you again," I said by way of greeting. But the faerie didn't answer. I tilted my head questioningly, and still, he remained silent. That was when I really looked at him.

It was obvious Collith hadn’t slept well last night, and several of the nights preceding it—there were slight smudges beneath his eyes, and his hair was tousled. He hadn’t shaved in a few days, either. Our gazes met at last, and in an instant, I understood what was happening. Collith was in this state because of me. Driven here by guilt or longing, maybe both. His eyes shone with torment, and I knew that, were I to attack him again, my ex wouldn’t lift a finger to defend himself. That if I cut him down right now, with words or with a literal sword, he’d let it happen. He’d absorb each blow as if it was exactly what he deserved.

And as I stared up at him, I realized that I couldn’t punish Collith harder than he was already punishing himself.

I left the door open, turned, and walked away, leaving the choice up to him whether he wanted to come in. After I’d paused the music, I resumed scraping a layer of soil over a seed, careful to avoid the edges of newly-cut glass.

“Were you injured?” Collith’s voice was soft, but I still jumped.

He was looking at my arm, where the Mark I’d gotten from Nicky was on full display. *Oh*, I thought. During the confrontation with Belanor, I’d been wearing long sleeves. “Yeah. It’s a long story,” I said.

One that I didn’t feel like telling. It must’ve been obvious, because Collith’s attention moved to the mess I’d made. “What are you doing?”

Clearing my throat, I set the bottle on the opposite side of the counter, where the other finished ones were clustered. “Drinking myself into a stupor was stressful for Emma, so I’m trying to find other ways to keep my mind occupied. Damon used to find comfort in gardening, so…” I shrugged.

“I can relate,” Collith commented, drawing closer. He stopped at the edge of the counter, standing to my right.

His words sparked a memory, and I faltered as I remembered the dream we’d shared. In my mind’s eye, I saw the fountain and the cobblestone path. I could smell the roses again, their subtle fragrance wafting past on a warm breeze. “That’s right… I’ve been to your garden,” I said faintly. “God, Damon would lose his mind if he saw it.”

“Perhaps…” Collith hesitated. “Perhaps I could take him there sometime. Once everything is in bloom again.”

I’d started filling another bottle with soil, and Collith’s words sent a burst of warmth through me. To hide it, I pretended to be completely

absorbed by the movements of my hands. I reached for another fistful of dirt and used the pause to consider my response carefully. The bag crinkled, a stark sound now that I'd turned off the music. Eventually I said, my voice soft and hesitant, "Well, if you do, make sure to bring Matt along, too. He'd love seeing all those flowers."

"I wouldn't dream of leaving him behind." Collith watched me for another moment, his expression fathomless. It still revealed nothing when he murmured, "Would you care for some company?"

I didn't answer—anything I said would feel like a lie, because I didn't know how I felt about Collith anymore. Somewhere between the alleyway outside the club and the battle with Belanor, I'd lost that hot anger I had been carrying around with me, smoldering in my chest like a coal. It didn't mean everything was forgiven and forgotten, though. Nothing would ever heal the burns.

"Why do you keep coming back?" I demanded, digging a hole so roughly that clumps of soil dropped onto the counter.

Slowly, Collith gripped the edge of the chair closest to me. His eyes darkened as he struggled with something. After a few seconds, his mouth tightened as if he'd come to a decision. Collith lifted his head and looked at me again, but this time, he didn't flinch. "Do you recall what you said to me, once, about why you were so determined to save Damon?"

I was going to shake my head when I found it—the memory Collith was talking about. I saw the two of us surrounded by the earthen walls of an underground room. I'd been about to leave for the first trial, so I wore a tank top and tennis shoes. Laurie stood nearby, as he so often did, while Collith and I discussed the true meaning of love.

They don't come along often. Those people who truly know you, who've seen the beautiful parts of you and the ugly ones, too, and stay anyway. Sometimes it's a romantic partner. Maybe it's a friend. But usually they come in the form of family. A parent, an aunt, a grandfather.

A brother.

And wouldn't you do anything to protect a person like that? To keep them in your life?

I refocused on Collith, painfully aware that my cheeks were flushed. His implication was clear, even to someone as stubborn as me. My heart peered through a crack in the barrier I'd erected… right before fear boarded it shut again.

“I spoke to Viessa last night,” I said suddenly, reaching for the packet of seeds again. Collith frowned at the abrupt shift in topic. I ignored it and continued, “I told her that Gwyn had been the one murdering council members, and she won’t be a problem anymore. I provided a ring as proof. Viessa asked me what I would like for a reward.”

Collith evidently decided not to push it. “Very strategic of her,” he said with a small shrug of acknowledgement. “If the bloodlines learn there’s something to be benefited from pleasing their new queen, they’ll rush to tell her whatever juicy tidbits they know.”

He stopped, giving me a chance to respond or go on. But I hesitated—we’d reached the part I hadn’t yet decided if I would tell Collith about. As I thought about it again, my pulse became fast and erratic. There was no way Collith hadn’t noticed, but he still didn’t try to force a conversation.

His patience gave me courage. It was a reminder of Collith’s kindness and what had drawn me to him in the first place. Suddenly I could hear his mother’s voice in my head, her pained whisper full of pleading. *Have faith in him.* She’d seen the good in her son, too, despite all the mistakes he’d made. Like me, Collith wasn’t evil or claimed by the dark.

We just lived in a world of shadows.

I kept my gaze on my hands while I spoke. “Knowing Viessa, the advantages of benevolence was probably a thought she had, yes. But I don’t think it’s the only reason she offered a reward. When I asked her to pardon you, she pretended to think for a few seconds… and then she agreed, Collith.

“If anyone asks, the official story is that you had something to do with stopping Gwyn, which is how Her Majesty can overlook your act of rebellion in the throne room. Her words, not mine. But I think… Viessa *wanted* to let you go. When I tried to reverse Lyari’s exile, the queen wasn’t quite so generous. That seemed like something worth knowing. It would hold meaning for me, if someone I’d loved…” I cleared my throat again. “Ultimately, the Guardians will no longer be hunting you, and you don’t have to shack up with Laurie anymore. You’re free.”

Silence met my news. I dared to glance up, and the way Collith was looking at me sent a rush of heat through my veins. That rebellious lock of hair had come loose, and it only added to his allure. I longed to rake it back.

“Thank you, Fortuna,” Collith said simply.

Hating that he still had such an effect on me, I dropped my gaze right back to the bottles. I wiped my forehead with the back of my wrist and hoped I hadn't left behind a smear of dirt. "Yeah, well, it's the least I can do, since I'm kind of the reason you lost the throne."

The casual tone I used eased the thickness between us, but barely. Just enough that I could think straight again. I yanked off the gloves and tossed them next to the bag of soil. Collith pulled away from the chair, his lips curving into a humorless smile. "Perhaps it's for the best. The Folduins finally getting their chance to rule, that is. I had a lot of time to think in that dungeon, and looking back, I don't believe I was a very good king. On the contrary, I suspect I was as poor a leader as I was a husband."

He said this without any trace of self-deprecation. I studied him and found myself wanting to believe what I saw—the remorse, the regret. A line deepened between my brows as I thought of everything we'd been through these past few weeks. Still considering it, I took a damp washcloth out of the sink and started cleaning the counter. After a few seconds, I forced myself to meet Collith's gaze.

"I don't think you were a good king," I told him, matching his neutrality. "But… I don't think I was a good queen, either."

It was as close to an apology that he would get. At this point, our story was so tangled and knotted that I wasn't sure who the strings belonged to or where they were supposed to go. Collith had been in the wrong, more than once, and so had I. All I truly knew for certain was that, in spite of everything, he loved me and I still wanted him. Maybe the healthiest choice would be to cut those strings entirely.

Collith's eyes were warm now. I watched them scan me, from my exposed legs all the way up to my battered T-shirt that showed bits of skin here and there. My core tightened in response. There was no point hiding my reaction to him, I thought. Goddamn faeries. It felt as if Collith was the moon and I was the tide, always helpless against his pull.

In a burst of rebellion, I threw the washcloth back into the sink and retreated from the counter. I'd put my supplies away later. "I'm going to change and go for a run. So… bye, I guess."

I didn't know what else to say. *Have a nice day? It was nice to see you?* Annoyed by how much he'd flustered me, I turned and hurried into my room. There was a slight shake to my hands as I pulled one of the

dresser drawers open. Moments later, Collith filled the doorway, just as I'd known he would. Just as part of me hoped he would.

"Fortuna," he said. That was it. Nothing else.

Knowing what I was about to do, I leaned forward and rested my forehead against my knuckles. "I hate you," I whispered brokenly. "I hate you so much."

Collith closed the door, eliminating the slant of light across the floor and enclosing us in darkness. He approached slowly. Once he was so close that I could feel his body temperature, Collith put his hands on my waist and turned me around. I didn't fight him. All I could think was, *Weak. I'm so weak*. He pressed his forehead to mine and said, "I know."

I made a helpless, frustrated sound. Then I reached up, slid my fingers around the back of Collith's neck, and pulled his face to mine.

We were too impatient to make our way to the bed, and we wrenched each other's clothes off right there, breaking apart only to come back together like a fire built anew. I touched every part of him I could reach, ravenous for the feel of his bare skin. Eventually Collith turned me around, his hold loose enough that I could step away whenever I wanted. My palms braced against the door as he pulled my shorts down, the only piece of clothing left between us. My body was tight with anticipation and wet with need. Then Collith was there, poking me with his hardness, finding his way inside.

I let out a gasp at the initial pain—he was so large, so deep—while Collith groaned. Hearing me, he went still. I reached back and found his sculpted backside, urging him onward with the press of my hands. That was all the encouragement he needed. Collith was more gentle this time, moving his hips at a languid pace. Soon the pain faded and my need became more urgent. I began to meet Collith thrust for thrust. He moaned and caught my fingers, holding them against the door. The length of his body crushed mine. His movements came faster and harder. I cried out, but Collith heard pleasure in the sound and didn't stop.

"Condoms?" he asked through his teeth.

"Don't have any," I gasped back. Without warning, Collith yanked himself out. I turned my head to protest, then belatedly realized he was coming. The warmth of him covered the upper curve of my ass and Collith's groan filled my ears again. Once his cock had gone still, he

shifted to grab the towel hanging on the bathroom door. He kissed the back of my neck while he wiped me clean.

Once he was done, I turned around and skimmed my palm down his chest. “That was…”

“We’re not finished,” Collith said, tugging at me.

Intrigued, I allowed him to lead me across the room and onto the bed. Collith knelt on the floor, nudged my knees apart with his own, then buried his face between them. I bit my wrist, overcome with sensation. His lips kissed and sucked, exploring every inch of me. My legs trembled and I couldn’t form a coherent thought. Then Collith did something that made me buck. His hands tightened on my hips.

“Collith,” I moaned, opening wider for him. “Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

“I’m not going to stop,” he murmured against my core. I almost came then and there. Collith retreated, but it was only to flip me over in a firm, deft movement. I was balanced on my hands and knees when he leaned forward again, his tongue delving inside me, his hands holding my legs in place as I writhed.

And then, suddenly, I was cresting that hill—the sensation was indescribable. Giving myself over to it, I felt my toes curl against the mattress and my eyes flutter shut. Release roared through me like a tidal wave.

The tremors were gradually coming to an end when Collith joined me on the bed. He was still naked, and even though I was drowsy with pleasure, I didn’t miss the opportunity to admire him. His biceps were hard and pronounced, flexing while he settled onto his side. They drew my notice toward the taut lines of his stomach, which led down to hard thighs and that long, delicious cock hanging between them.

Desire stirred again, and I rolled onto my stomach, reaching for Collith at the same time.

But as soon as my arm moved, his attention shifted. Whatever he saw made him frown. Collith reached toward me silently, then traced the faint scars on my back. I glanced over my shoulder, startled. Most of the time, I forgot about them.

It was obvious the marks bothered him, and I could guess why—they were a permanent reminder of our dark beginning. I cupped Collith’s jaw and turned his face away, forcing him to focus on me. I’d put scars on him,

too. Ninety years of torture that still lived in his eyes. Those eyes met mine now.

“I love you,” Collith said. He didn’t apologize out loud, but it was in his gaze. In the gentleness of his fingers as he traced another lash, beginning at the top of my spine and ending on the back of my thigh.

I didn’t respond because there were a thousand reasons not to. He was still Collith, the faerie king who had lied to me and betrayed me. I was still Fortuna, the volatile Nightmare who had sent him to Hell and slept with his ex.

Feeling sober now, my earlier bliss faded, I pulled my hand back and sank onto the pillow. I had a brief, feeble thought about getting dressed, but the door was closed and we hadn’t left any evidence in the main room, so I allowed myself to stay in bed for the second time today. After a moment, Collith put his head down, too. He closed his eyes, his eyelashes dark fringes against a smooth, pale cheek. I found myself staring, unable to look away. Minutes passed and I did nothing but gaze at the male in my bed. The one that I could never completely get out of my head, no matter what he’d done.

In a burst of restlessness, I rolled over. Now my back rested against Collith’s chest and stomach. His cool skin was such a relief that I didn’t move, though I knew I should. Why was it so hot in here? Where *was* everyone? More minutes went by. I listened to Collith’s soft breathing and realized that he’d fallen asleep. It was proof of the exhaustion I had seen in his face. I couldn’t bring myself to wake him, though he hardly deserved my pity. If I had any self-respect at all, I should kick him out of this bed and my life.

Instead, I thought of how badly I’d missed this since we were last together, even when I hated him most. I thought of all the tender moments we’d exchanged before I learned his secret. Playing Connect Four. Waltzing. Grieving together.

There were a thousand reasons not to want Collith Sylvyre… and not a single one of them mattered.

My whisper was fragile, barely more than a faint exhale. Yet it still managed to float between us. “I love you, too.”

I waited with bated breath, trying to discern from his breathing if he was still asleep. With every second that ticked past, relief expanded in me like a small balloon. Maybe I hadn’t really thought he would hear it. It was

easy to take back something you'd said while the other person was unconscious.

The balloon popped when Collith's hand stole across my stomach and curved around my hip. He pulled at me gently, saying nothing about the wild heartbeat between us. I gave in to his silent request and turned onto my back. Propped on his side, Collith lowered his head. Our legs tangled as our mouths met in a deep, perfect kiss. But there was sadness in it, too —he knew I hadn't forgiven him.

Then Collith shifted, reaching down between us, and he was back inside me. Rocking into my body as if he'd never get another chance. Every thought left my head once more. I moved with him, linking my ankles at the small of his back. As always, Collith gave thought to my pleasure, as well. His fingers found my center, trailing through the wet folds before stopping at the top, right on that tight bundle of nerves aching to be touched. He teased and rubbed it, all the while thrusting his hips in a rough, urgent rhythm.

"Collith," I breathed, throwing my head back. His mouth descended on my collarbone and left a trail of fire. "Collith, I'm so close…"

And then the world came apart again.

My family slept all around me.

Sleep eluded me, though. I laid on my back, staring up at the ceiling. My thoughts were leaves caught in a wind current, going around and around. Reliving not just what happened since Belanor kidnapped me, but everything before that. Every twist and turn. Each mistake and misstep. All the surprises and heartbreaks.

I remembered the good moments, too. It seemed impossible there had been even one, yet there were several scattered throughout the current. I remembered the sound of Matthew's laughter. What Laurie's kisses felt like. The warmth of exchanging a conspiratorial look with Gil. And so many more that. Laying there, I realized how lucky I'd been. My life wasn't easy, but it had love. I had seen inside enough minds to know how special that was.

After a couple hours, I pushed all that aside and tried to focus on the most insistent thought. It wasn't the loudest, necessarily, but it kept coming back like an anxious dog.

We're missing something.

We still hadn't found Belanor's master. If the black spell cast on him and the reek of sulfur were any indication, we were fucked. Laurie thought the loose ends had been neatly tied, or maybe he'd deliberately ignored those dangling threads. He was too impatient to reclaim his kingdom.

Beside me, Collith's breathing was deep and even, but I knew there was nothing peaceful about the thoughts behind those eyelids. Even now, sated from what we'd just done, the corners of his full mouth were turned down. I wondered if he was dreaming of Hell. Or killing his father. Or one of the hundreds of other horrors in his head.

Maybe Kindreth had finally come looking for her journals…

The journals.

I flew upright in bed, my eyes wide. *That* was where I'd seen the symbol before—the one on both me and Jacob. Kindreth had drawn all the bloodline crests, and Olorel's had always been at the back of mind, waiting to be reexamined. I hadn't made the connection because the brand was Olorel's family crest combined with the symbol for the binding spell put on me as a child.

Two overlapping shapes, two meanings, forged into one sinister purpose. Binding. Opening. A variation of the demonic possession spell, maybe? But why did Belanor specifically want a Nightmare?

Collith might have more insight. At the very least, he'd be a fresh perspective.

I was reaching for his shoulder at the same moment my senses prickled. Suddenly there was power in the air, so potent that it felt like static electricity. I pulled my hand back, frowning. No one who intended harm could step foot onto Cyrus's land, that was what Savannah had told me. So it couldn't be an enemy entering the barn. Unless Savannah had botched her spell.

It wouldn't be the first time.

The power didn't retreat. It didn't become any stronger, either. It just… hovered there, as if it were waiting for something. I lifted my head off the pillow to see the alarm clock. Unease trickled through me when I saw the numbers. The Witching Hour. I stayed there for another minute,

my heart pounding harder. Trying to determine if there was anything threatening about the presence that had appeared at the edge of my psyche. I only detected a mild expectancy from that roiling strangeness.

I considered waking Collith again. But the consciousness brushing against mine didn't move or change. An enemy probably would've entered the loft already or set off my internal alarms.

The rug was soft against the soles of my feet. Setting the covers aside, I stood up and retrieved my clothes from the various spots they'd been discarded in our rush. Once I was dressed, I took a small pistol out of the nightstand and quietly loaded it. Collith slept on, his eyelashes a dark fringe against his high cheekbones. My gaze lingered on him as I opened the door and slipped through.

Despite the hour, there was nothing eerie or unnerving about the loft. Emma had left two lamps on, and their gentle glow only made the space cozier. I crept across the floor, moving as silently as a faerie because of the thick rugs.

On the off chance there *was* an assassin in the stairwell, I flattened against the wall on the left side of the door. Then I reached with my right hand, holding the gun up in the other. I didn't give fear a chance to take root. In the next instant I grasped the knob, took a steadying breath, and yanked the door open.

Silence hummed in the air like an electric current.

Holding my breath, I pressed my eye to the crack between the door and the wall. My visitor's scent wafted past, so subtle a human wouldn't notice it. I knew that scent. Frowning, I dared to poke my head around the door now, still keeping half of my body wedged behind it.

When I saw who stood in the shadows, my frown deepened. I lowered the gun and shifted into the open. "Jacob? What are you—"

I caught sight of his reflection and the rest of the question stuck in my throat.

The man in the mirror was the most beautiful person I'd ever seen. More shining than Laurie, more lovely than Collith, more detailed than Oliver. He wasn't especially tall, but he had wide shoulders. His body was slender and his hips narrow. His high cheekbones accented his clear blue eyes. His hair was longish and silky. Golden. He wore a button-up white shirt with the sleeves shoved to his elbows and fitted jeans. A tattoo encircled his wrist. His very skin seemed to glow.

I forgot all of this when I finally noticed his wings.

They were so dark that they blended with the night. Huge, unmoving, dangerous things. The edges looked as sharp as razors, and though I'd been led to believe from Mom's lessons that wings were things of feathers, these clicked and clacked in layers upon layers of metal.

"Who are you?" The air was so still that it felt as if I had shouted the words.

"I am a friend," the thing wearing Jacob said. His voice was nice. Calm and lilting. We were still looking at each other through the mirror. "Thank you for leading me to this host. He's not quite strong enough for my needs, but for now, he will do."

"Who are you?" I repeated quietly. A ringing had begun in my ears.

He *tsk*ed gently, making the sound sensual, somehow. "Do you really not know who I am, Fortuna? I thought you were more perceptive."

The way he said my name was terrifying. As if this wasn't the first time we'd met. As if he knew me. As if he could sense every hidden impulse and every secret yearning. It was a whisper on the edge of my subconscious, like a bubble struggling to the surface.

Comprehension slammed into me.

Suddenly it felt like I'd been walking through the dark all these years, but now I'd been given a single spark that was enough to send other lights lighting up along the edges of my path. I could see it in my mind. With each light I walked past, making it brighten, a strangely beautiful domino effect seemed to occur, and the next one flared to life.

First, I heard Åsa's voice insisting that I'd been promised to someone. The memory of her voice brought the rest of that night back in vivid detail. My parents had stared back at her, their faces so drawn and pale, even as Dad raised his gun. They'd been willing to commit murder to protect me from what they'd known was coming.

What they'd known was coming, I thought again. The next light on the path inside my head was Savannah. I saw her tear-streaked face and the mad light in her eyes as she spat, *Someone is coming for you. The aura is closer now. That night, you opened a door that shouldn't have been opened, Fortuna. Do you have any idea what you've done?*

She'd been talking about the Door I opened by making a deal with a demon. A Door to Hell.

Hell. The next light shone eagerly, pulling me toward it. Feeling numb, I thought of the sulfur smell Vulen had detected within Belanor's mind. What we'd mistaken for demonic possession had just been manic devotion. Belanor was nothing more than a tool, a pawn. He'd been a vulnerable child, scorned for his weakness, and someone had seen potential in a young royal's pain. That someone had sent a witch to carry out his bidding. The terrible spell that had been forcibly performed on Belanor wasn't to allow a demon to take hold… it had been to give someone access.

The spell. The brand. Yet another light came on along the brightening path. I remembered Jacob's horror when he realized the binding on my power was gone. His laughter rang in my ears. *You think our kind has been pushed to the brink of extinction because of* hunters*?*

It hadn't been hunters, I could see that now—it had just been one. One creature who could communicate with anyone that performed dark magic, like Åsa and the witch from Belanor's violent childhood memory. I'd already figured out that Åsa and Belanor had both been desperate for Nightmares because they'd both served the same master; I just hadn't put together that it had involved my entire species. All of us hunted and slaughtered for one agenda, one sinister purpose. A powerful individual with access to a variety of Fallenkind to search for Nightmares, far and wide, like Jacob Goldmann, Fortuna Sworn, and a countless number of others throughout history. Fallenkind that included Belanor and the cherubim.

Another light winked into existence within my head. *The cherubim.*

Just before Laurie killed Arcaena, the faerie and I had spoken briefly. I'd blamed her for the creatures that destroyed Bea's bar, and even then her surprise had seemed genuine to me. *Cherubim, you say? They are the mongrels of the underworld. You have made some powerful enemies, little Nightmare, if cherubim are after you.*

She must've known, damn her. In that moment, she'd known what I was up against, and withholding it from me was Arcaena's final revenge for killing her twin. More consequences to the reckless choices.

There had been one other person who could've told me, I thought with a rush of helpless frustration. He hadn't withheld the truth from me out of pettiness, at least. I pictured Jacob's face again, just before he'd left in a

lurch of car exhaust and terror. *Sometimes, he can reach you in your dreams.*

My dreams.

Arcaena and Jacob weren't the only people who'd known about the one hunting me. My parents had figured out the truth, somehow, and they'd done everything to stop him. Even binding my power and making it *useless*, as Dad had said in that cave. He was protecting me. *Just as he's protecting me now*, I thought slowly.

Reliving the last time I spoke with my father, I saw his wide eyes, felt the desperation in his fingers as he grabbed my hands. He'd seen that golden-haired person in my head and realized what was happening. *Wait. Fortuna, hold on. That wasn't me, in your dream, do you understand?*

Matthew Sworn was long dead, and not even the bleak divide of death had stopped him from being the brave father I remembered from my childhood.

There was no time to linger near the warmth of this light, because I was realizing there was one other person I was forgetting. One other person who'd learned of the danger lurking in my future. Nym had also tried to warn me, in his own confused, desperate way. In my mind's eye, I saw all those broken clocks and the ancient faerie standing in the middle of them, his skin white, his body frail. Still beautiful, despite the tragicness of that moment, or maybe even because of it. I heard his hoarse, terrified whisper. *Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*.

My eyes flew back to the golden-haired stranger standing in that mirror.

I was at the end of the mental path now. There were no more lights, no more blinding truths to lighten the dark. We'd only been standing there a few seconds, but it felt like a small eternity had passed since I opened the door. The male smiled, slow and smoldering. The sight of it evoked such an instant, powerful response from my body it was immediately followed by an avalanche of terror that sent a rush of cold through me.

There had been so many signs. So many painfully obvious clues. I should've seen them sooner. Why hadn't I fucking *seen* them?

Survival instincts scrambled to gain purchase. I thought of everything I knew about the figure currently filling my doorway. His faces were legion. His names even more so.

“It’s nice to finally meet in person, Fortuna Sworn,” he said warmly, interrupting my desperate efforts.

That *voice*—it made me think of silk bedsheets and bare skin. Something in me clenched. I held the door knob tighter, fighting to hold onto reason. Names, I’d been thinking of names.

Serpent. Tempter. Beast. Adversary. Wanderer. Dragon. Rebel. My mind whispered one more, but I couldn’t bring myself to say it out loud. The stranger’s smile widened, as if he heard it anyway. I took a short, shuddering breath and let it out. At that moment, I heard it, too.

Lucifer.

END OF BOOK FOUR

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.J. Sutton lives in Minnesota with her two rescue dogs. She has received multiple awards for her work, and she graduated with a master's degree in Creative Writing from Hamline University.

When she's writing, K.J. always has a cup of Vanilla Chai in her hand and despises wearing anything besides pajamas. K.J. Sutton also writes young adult novels as Kelsey Sutton.

Be friends with her on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. And don't forget to subscribe to her newsletter so you never miss an update!